

Britain: Massive abstention in Unite leadership contest

Peter Reydt
19 March 2009

Derek Simpson has only narrowly held on to his position as general secretary of the Amicus section of the trade union Unite. The election result means he will continue as joint general secretary with Tony Woodley of the Transport and General Workers' Union section of Unite.

Simpson received less than 38 percent of the votes cast. But this was made worse by the fact that turnout was only 14.5 percent of eligible voters.

The low turnout underscores the extreme disconnect of workers from the trade unions. Even for such an important election, the trade union bureaucracy could not mobilise the participation of their rank and file members, and for the most part did not want to do so. After they have carried out decades of pro-capitalist policies, these organisations have only a negative significance in the day-to-day lives of the majority of workers.

These issues could clearly be seen in the way the election was brought about and fought out.

It was bound up with the process of merger between the Transport and General Workers' Union and Amicus into the "super union" Unite in May 2007, which sparked a dogfight for lucrative positions.

Unite is the largest trade union in Britain, with almost two million members across every industry. It is also the largest contributor to the political fund of the Labour Party.

The merger was driven by falling membership figures and finances. But the two unions could only be persuaded to pool their resources by dividing leading posts between them for a time. It was agreed that Simpson would retire on his 66th birthday, on December 23, 2010, and Woodley one year later. Currently, the union maintains separate financial and membership systems for the TGWU and Amicus sides, and separate rule books. But the merger was to be formally complete in November 2008, with an election for a single general secretary of the union due in 2010.

The entire process was jeopardised by a legal challenge from Jerry Hicks, a former Socialist Workers Party member who is now a supporter of George Galloway's Respect. He

challenged the agreement that Simpson could continue past his retirement age—a deal that flouted Amicus union rules. Hicks pointed out that Simpson himself had won the leadership of Amicus after he had mounted a successful challenge in 2002 to the incumbent Sir Ken Jackson on the same grounds.

Hicks complained that the agreement to delay Simpson's retirement added to the disengagement of workers from the union, which was damaging the fighting capacity of Amicus. His argument found some support within the union. He won the second highest vote, at almost 25 percent of the ballots cast. This was despite efforts by the union's leading bodies to derail his standing. The union tops were venomously opposed to Hicks's challenge, which threw their plans into crisis. They thought everything was stitched up and the status quo within the leading echelons ensured.

If Simpson was made to stand down early, Unite would have to stage an election for a single general secretary that would also threaten Woodley's position. Nevertheless the bureaucracy was forced to acknowledge that Hicks's challenge would legally stand. To bypass this threat, a special meeting of the Unite executive council put on hold the process of full integration until May 1, 2009. This allowed the election in the Amicus section to go ahead, with the winner holding office for a year, from December 2009 to December 2010.

Even so, in the current political climate it was far from certain that Simpson could hold on to his position. Hicks made sufficient left sounding noises to be a threat. He attacked the lucrative pay of Amicus's leading personnel, reportedly the highest of any Union in Britain, promising to only draw an average skilled worker's wage when elected—a stand that would chime with workers.

Using union resources a letter was sent out outlining Simpson's supposed union successes, and the spring issue of the union magazine, with Simpson's picture on the front, was published early in February. Finally, when the ballot papers were sent out, they included a document that accused Hicks of lying over Simpson's remunerations.

But a further setback for Simpson came in the form of a campaign waged by Rupert Murdoch's *Times* against him over allegations of perks and breaking union rules, obviously aimed at supporting his right-wing challenger, Kevin Coyne. Unite has mounted a legal challenge to Times Newspapers Ltd for "a series of libels" against Simpson.

From the outset there was an attempt to marginalise Hicks. The Broad Left, comprising what remains of the Labour left and the Communist Party of Britain and gathered around the *Amicus Unity Gazette*, initially backed a third candidate, Laurence Faircloth. Faircloth had enough nominations to stand in the election. But the Broad Left subsequently prevailed upon him to withdraw in order to unite behind Simpson. In a statement issued by the editorial board on February 2, it announced its gratitude to Faircloth "for the principled position he has taken in withdrawing his candidature". The statement went on to say that it had been determined that Faircloth could not "mount a credible challenge" and that "therefore the members are faced with a stark choice between Derek Simpson and Kevin Coyne".

"Voting for Derek Simpson is by far the better option for the Left", it continued. While it was not possible to "impose this decision through the discipline of the Left", it nonetheless recommended "Vote for Simpson—Stop Coyne!"

In the event, Simpson was re-elected pulling only 60,048 votes. Taken from the 1,096,511 eligible voters that means just 5.5 percent of all members of the Amicus section bothered to vote for him. Jerry Hicks got 39,307, Kevin Coyne 30,603 and Paul Reuter 28,283 votes.

This was a disastrous result for Simpson and the Hicks camp is celebrating its vote as a victory. They deem their support as a platform for the election of a single general secretary of Unite now due next year. In his post election statement Hicks says, "We were all so close to making history. It has given us a glimpse of what is possible.... I promise that this is not the end but the beginning".

The beginning of what?

All that Hicks promises is the same as Simpson pledged in 2002, when he was elected as the favoured candidate of the left. At that time, Simpson's campaign for a "fighting" union was supported by the Socialist Alliance—an amalgam of Britain's various pseudo-left groups, including those now backing Hicks. Simpson was also hailed as someone who would reorganise the trade union into a fighting organisation for the working class. Instead he steadily marched to the right, supporting Labour's anti-working class policies, and is now known as Gordon Brown's favourite trade unionist.

Hicks argues for a "fighting union" that "instils a confidence in members to resist employers' attacks". He talks of mounting a "left campaign calling for people before profit, public ownership not privatisation, and a green

campaign".

But at no point does he call into question the capitalist system itself. His outlook is that of a reformist who accepts the right of the employers to exploit the working class. Hicks was active in and defended the divisive and nationalist campaign at the Lindsay oil refinery, where workers demonstrated under the slogan of "British jobs for British workers". In his post election statement headlined, "The Good the Bad and the Ugly", he says, "...there was 'the Good' which was the eruption a few weeks ago of the rumbling volcano of anger in the construction industry, with the unofficial strikes at the Lindsey oil refinery".

The working class does not simply need a change of leaders. It needs a new perspective and new organisations of struggle. Currently we are witnessing a fundamental breakdown of the capitalist economy, a systemic crisis deeper than the 1930's. The perspective of trying to secure minor reforms and concessions, in place of a struggle against capitalism, leads to the acceptance of pay cuts and job losses. Up and down the country and worldwide, trade unions are negotiating pay cuts, temporary closures and redundancies. This past week, Unite agreed to a 10 percent pay cut at Toyota effecting 4,800 workers.

Only by mobilising independently on a socialist programme against the profit system can the working class develop effective resistance against the attacks on its living conditions.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact