# Britain: Behind the disciplinary action in the Unison trade union

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The disciplinary action taken by the public sector union Unison against several of its members raises important issues of political perspective.

Following a two-year investigation, Unison barred four members of the Socialist Party—Glenn Kelly, Onay Kasab, Brian Debus and Suzanne Muna—from office for between three and five years. The four, who are all local union officials in London, were found guilty of breaching union rules.

The charges result from a leaflet entitled "Whose Conference?" which they circulated at a Unison national conference in June of 2007. Featuring a cartoon of three monkeys and the saying, "See no evil, Hear no evil, Speak no evil," the leaflet noted that the Standing Orders Committee at the conference had rejected one third of resolutions submitted for discussion. Querying whether these had been ruled out of order because they were "controversial," it asked branches to return motions to the conference agenda.

Unison charged that the leaflet was racist and an attack on the "integrity" of the Standing Orders Committee, and was "in breach of rules."

The charge of racism was ridiculous. Despite this, while the investigation accepted there was no racist intent, it still found the four guilty of producing material that "gave racist offence to members." Debus was also found guilty of misappropriating branch funds by arranging for production of the leaflet.

An Employment Tribunal initiated by the four purged SP members at the end of August heard evidence that the campaign against them was directed from the highest echelons of the union. Over the last three years, several other members of the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party have been expelled from Unison on flimsy charges.

**Defence of the bureaucracy**

While the four SP members are clearly the victims of a politically motivated frame-up, the conflict largely has the character of a struggle within the union apparatus. Notwithstanding their claims to be Trotskyist organisations, the SP and the SWP do not function as a socialist oppositional current within the trade unions.

Both organisations have their origins in right-wing breaks during the 1950s from the Fourth International founded by Leon Trotsky. The SP is the successor to the Militant tendency, established by Ted Grant, while Tony Cliff founded the SWP.

Although from apparently differing starting points—Cliff rejected Trotsky's characterisation of the Stalinist bureaucracy as a parasitic caste and designated the Soviet Union a state-capitalist country, while Grant argued that the establishment of Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and China was proof that the Soviet bureaucracy could play a leading role in establishing workers states—they shared a fundamental outlook.

Adapting to the restablisation of capitalism after World War II, made possible by the political betrayals of Stalinism and social democracy, they rejected any possibility of socialist revolution. They developed a perspective based on the insistence that the domination of the labour bureaucracies, their parties and trade union apparatuses, could not be challenged. In place of the building of genuinely revolutionary Marxist organisations, they claimed that the task of Trotskyists was to pressure the Labour Party and the trade unions to the left.

Over the last decade, the bankruptcy of this political perspective has been proven. The break-up of the post-war arrangements under the impact of globalised production fatally undermined the Stalinist and Labour bureaucracies, which responded by transforming themselves into the open political tools of the financial oligarchy. Under conditions of a global economic crisis, growing inter-imperialist antagonisms and militarism, the bureaucracies impose the dictates of the international financial markets while attempting to whip up nationalism in defence of their "own"

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ruling elite.

The resulting vast disconnect between the mass of working people and their traditional organisations has forced the SP and the SWP to make tactical adjustments—most notably in the creation, in certain instances, of electoral fronts as a supposed alternative to Labour.

Nonetheless, their political standpoint remains essentially the same—hostility to the mobilisation of the working class independently of the old bureaucracies. While now forced into a critical stance against the Labour Party, they insist that any break with Labour and formation of a new workers' party can take place only in and through the trade unions.

**Part of the apparatus**

This is not only the outcome of false politics. There is a social basis for their position, which ultimately determines their political line.

While in recent years the unions have imposed pay limits, job cuts and privatisation, and local branches have become little more than hollowed out shells, the ex-radical organisations have assumed a significant role within the bureaucratic apparatuses of various unions.

These positions are not used to advance the interests of the rank and file, but as a means of strengthening relations between the ex-radical groups and the union tops and convincing the latter of their reliability.

During militant strike action by postal workers in 2007, for example, when the Communication Workers Union was cooking up another rotten deal with Royal Mail over jobs and pensions, SWP member and CWU Vice-President Jane Loftus kept silent on the union's machinations. With strike action again breaking out across the postal service, nothing has again been heard from her.

In Northern Ireland, when shop stewards in the Amalgamated Transport and General Workers Union at Belfast's international airport were sacked for their role in an unofficial strike—their victimisation having been aided by an agreement worked out with management by their own union—SWP member and ATGWU Regional Secretary Jimmy Kelly refused to meet with the victimised workers and did not lift a finger in their defence.

As for the SP, at the very point where Unison was taking disciplinary action against the four, the SP publicly denounced one of its own members for daring to suggest that the role of left activists should be to fight for the overthrow of the bureaucracy (See "Britain: Once again on the role of the "left" within the trade unions") and argued that Unison General Secretary Dave Prentis could be pressured into mobilising opposition to the government. The SP has hailed the election of six of its members onto Unison's National Executive Committee as critical to its efforts to transform Unison "into a fighting democratic union."

Unison's disciplinary measures were intended as a shot across the bow of the SP and others, at a time when the union was being looked to by the Labour government to implement its pay freeze in the public sector. It was a warning to the various pseudo-left groups in the trade unions that their presence will be tolerated only in so far as they do nothing that could, however unintentionally, ignite a genuine rebellion against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

The message was received loud and clear. The SP has no intention of taking up a fight against the bureaucracy. That is why its campaign to defend its members has been such a lacklustre affair, portraying the disciplinary action as an isolated incident carried out by a few right-wingers.

In its appeal for letters of protest to be sent to Unison, the SP called meekly to "remove the charges" and for the union to "be supporting such respected activists, not attacking them." There was no call for a mass mobilisation against the right wing and the driving out of the witch-hunters. Nor is there a record of any of the SP's members on the union Executive Committee even tabling a motion of no confidence against Unison leader Prentis.

In similar fashion, the SWP reported the recent speech by Prentis to June's Unison conference in breathless tones, citing it as an example of how the "left" had captured the "spirit" of the conference—even providing a link to the full text of Prentis' remarks on the Unison web site.

Events in Unison are a practical refutation of the claims of the SP and SWP to be "capturing" the trade unions and turning them into "fighting" organisations. The new movement of the working class will, of necessity, take the form of a revolt against the labour and trade union bureaucracy and a repudiation of its political apologists.

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