

Ed Miliband takes up the poisoned chalice as the UK's Labour Party leader

Robert Stevens
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Ed Miliband has won the contest to become Labour Party leader by the narrowest of margins. His victory over his brother, former foreign secretary David Miliband, was secured only thanks to a campaign waged on his behalf by those within the trade union bureaucracy who desperately want to distance themselves from the deeply unpopular legacy of the last Labour government.

Ed Miliband, a supporter of Tony Blair's replacement as Labour leader by Gordon Brown, was still held up as offering a break from New Labour and a viable alternative to his brother, the chosen candidate of the Blairite wing of the party. David Miliband easily led the vote amongst Labour parliamentarians and party members, a testimony to its unreconstructed right-wing character.

The Labour Party election is decided under an Electoral College system. There are three colleges, equally divided. These are the votes from Members of Parliament (MPs) and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), from individual party members, and from affiliated organisations including trade unions. The successful candidate must secure more than 50 percent of the vote, or the poorest performer is eliminated and his or her second preference indications reassigned. This continues until there is an overall victor.

The Miliband brothers were standing against three other candidates, Ed Balls, the former advisor to Gordon Brown; Andy Burnham; and Dianne Abbott. Abbott, the only ostensibly "left" challenger, was eliminated in the first round after winning just 7.4 percent of the vote. This included the votes of just seven MPs, including herself. She received less than one third of the votes of the 23 members of the official party left, the Campaign Group of Labour MPs, which cannot even function as a collective entity.

Burnham and Balls were eliminated in the second and third rounds, respectively. After this, Ed Miliband's victory was only secured by the votes he won from members of the trade unions affiliated to Labour. Even here, the vote was small and deeply divided despite the campaign waged by all the largest unions for Ed Miliband. He was backed by the leadership of all the larger unions, with the exception of the retail workers' union, USDAW.

In the trade union vote, Ed Miliband won by 60 percent to 40

percent against David Miliband, whereas among party members David Miliband won by 54 percent to 46 percent and among MPs/MEPs he won by 53 percent to 47 percent. Ed Miliband won by just 1.3 percent of the vote, in the last round of voting, securing 50.65 percent to David Miliband's 49.35 percent.

Since Blair's initial General Election win in 1997, Labour Party membership has collapsed by more than half, from 400,000 to 170,000. And today, under conditions where millions of workers and those middle class layers who had once supported Labour have abandoned them due to the party's pro-business policies, most of those that remain gave their endorsement for the most openly right-wing and "New Labour" candidate.

The vast majority of trade unionists in unions affiliated to Labour did not even vote in the contest. Fully 2,747,030 ballot papers were sent out, but only 247,339 trade unionists voted.

Among the three biggest trade unions—Unite, Unison and the GMB, with a collective membership of more than 3.5 million—the turnout was just 8.3 percent. In Unite, Labour's largest affiliated union, more 1 million ballot papers were distributed, but only 10.5 percent of its members voted. Many of those voting for Ed Miliband would be members of the union bureaucracy at all levels and its immediate periphery.

Ed Miliband was helped in the latter stages of the campaign by the intervention of Lord Peter Mandelson in support of David Miliband. One of the architects along with Blair and Brown of the New Labour project, Mandelson told BBC Radio 4 that Labour had lost the General Election in May due to its fighting on a manifesto, written by Brown and Ed Miliband, that wasn't right-wing enough. He described the manifesto as "a crowd-pleasing Guardianista [readers of the nominally left-leaning *Guardian* newspaper] manifesto that completely passed by that vast swath of the population who weren't natural Labour voters" that "offered nothing to people worried about immigration, housing and welfare scroungers".

Mandelson's intervention, openly attacking the poorest and worst-off in society, would have raised the hackles of many who believe it was his policies that led to Labour's election defeat and concern at just how far to the right the Blairites want to push the party in its aftermath. In an article reporting Mandelson's comments, the *Guardian* noted, "Blair is reported

to have remarked that Ed Miliband would be a ‘disaster’ for Labour”. The trade union bureaucracy, in particular, is aware that explosive social tensions are building up, focusing on opposition to the cuts programme being imposed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. They calculate that if there is not even a separation between Labour and the government at the level of presentation, then the result could be disastrous.

Even so, despite a hysterical Tory media portraying Ed Miliband as “Red Ed”, there was nothing of substance to distinguish his policies from those of his brother. In his campaign, Ed Miliband said Labour must “turn the page on the past” and “move on”. But as his victory appeared more certain, his opponents and supporters within the bureaucracy alike came forward to insist that this must not be interpreted as a shift to the left.

Former cabinet minister Alan Johnson, in a *Guardian* interview Saturday, insisted that the Labour Party mustn’t oppose the austerity measures of the government. “We’ve got to be very careful how we play this,” he said. “They [the public] don’t want to see the deficit go on forever.... We have got to be careful of a lurch on that”.

Endorsing the “very rational calm approach” of the recent Trades Union Congress decision not to call any industrial action against the cuts, Johnson said, “You don’t want a return of the finger jabbers, the shouting and screaming vitriol.”

The unions should not engage in anything that would “allow themselves to be categorised as [heralding] a return of the winter of discontent.”

The previous day, the *Guardian* reported on a survey conducted by David Muir, the director of political strategy for Gordon Brown between 2008 and 2010. Muir’s survey, overseen by the market research group YouGov for the think tank Demos, centred on the views of a “particular group of voters in the Midlands and south-east of England, described by market research as ‘happy families’,” who “live in new-build housing; many have young children, a household annual income of £20,000 to £30,000, and are cash and time poor.”

The survey claims to have found that “In marginals, such as Milton Keynes in Buckinghamshire, this group represents 40 percent of the population” and “They are the most positive about the [Conservative/Liberal Democrat] coalition,” and support its cuts.

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Following Miliband’s win, the *Observer* editorialised, “Labour might get a short-term boost in the polls by resisting every cut”, but “to be trusted in government again the party needs a more sophisticated response to the coalition’s tale of a bloated state. It must accept that in government it reached the limits of what can be achieved by cascading money down from Whitehall and ordering public servants to effect social change.”

The newspaper noted with approval that Ed Miliband, in his

first leadership speech, “adopted his brother’s more nuanced approach to the coalition, suggesting he would eschew the politics of tribal belligerence.”

Ed Miliband is clearly “on message”. On Sunday, he told the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show*, “I am not going to oppose every cut the government comes up with.”

He agreed with Marr that substantial cuts would have been made and public sector workers’ jobs lost had Labour won the election. His leadership, he said, was “Not about some lurch to the left...all these characterisations about ‘Red Ed’ are tiresome and rubbish”.

Speaking for the trade union bureaucracy, the joint leader of Unite, Derek Simpson, said Miliband was not a “blast from the past”. Of the trade unions, he added, “We’re not extremists at all, Ed’s not an extremist...we don’t expect him to write blank cheques for us on policies—why would he and why should he?”

It should be noted that all the candidates in the leadership contest supported maintaining the anti-trade union laws first introduced by Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and upheld by Blair and Brown. In an interview with the *Labour Research* magazine, all five opposed re-introducing the right for workers to take secondary strike action in support of other workers.

As Labour’s annual congress gets under way, it is imperative for the trade union apparatus to maintain the pretence that they and the party offer an alternative to the austerity agenda of the government. That all they could come up with is to back Ed Miliband is a measure of how deep the crisis they face has become. The thin gruel Miliband offers will neither convince the semi-mythical “happy families” they claim have been fooled into accepting the need for cuts, nor placate the millions of workers who are angry and determined to fight back.



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