

The ex-left and the British Airways-Unite agreement

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The agreement with British Airways endorsed by the Unite trade union was so bad that, for days after it was known that the union was recommending acceptance, it was impossible to find out what it contained.

Even at the mass meeting of cabin crew on May 12, where it was agreed to ballot on the proposed deal, its contents were not disclosed—in order to buttress the claims made by Unite and its general secretary Len McCluskey that an “honourable settlement” had been reached.

In reality, after a dispute lasting 20 months, Unite did far worse than to accept all of BA’s demands, with the slashing of jobs and introduction of a two-tier workforce with new entrants on inferior pay. It signed up to an open-scabs charter, agreeing to BA’s right to train and use a special pool of replacement cabin crew in the event of any future strike. It also pledged that it would not defend its own members should they take legal action against BA, such as an employment tribunal, and agreed for workers to be penalised if they take industrial action.

The first public airing of the details of the agreement provoked a bitter dispute between the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP), which work together in the United Left faction of Unite.

The publication in the *Socialist Worker* of a May 21 article detailing what was being proposed and calling for rejection provoked a witch-hunting response from the United Left.

United Left chair and Unite executive member Martin Meyer and United Left secretary Paul Birkett circulated a letter declaring, “Most United Left Executive members were shocked and angry last week at an article entitled ‘BA workers should reject this shoddy deal’ which appeared in the Socialist Worker 21 May edition and which was being sold by three UNITED LEFT Executive Council members who are members of the SWP outside Congress House whilst the UNITE Executive was in session... The article caused offence by implicitly

criticising our left Secretary, Len McCluskey and our UNITE BASSA reps for recommending the ‘terrible deal’.”

Meyer and Birkett went on to denounce the article as “a public act of treachery”, “a supreme act of disloyalty towards our left-run Union, including our BASSA reps and our left General Secretary,” and “a typical piece of ultra-leftism which seeks to turn members against their own union”.

It closes by suggesting that the SWP should be expelled from the United Left.

“What many UNITED LEFT colleagues are now asking is how can we sit alongside SWP members whose party newspaper attacks the union in this way?... Is this now a ‘step too far?’”

The Socialist Party solidarised itself with the scathing attack on the SWP for the “crime” of breaking ranks with the United Left—even though it initially wrote in the *Socialist* that “serious question marks must hang over the conduct of the national union leadership during the dispute.”

Keven Parslow, convenor of the Socialist Party’s Unite caucus, makes clear that such comments are mere political camouflage. No one, above all “lefts” from McCluskey on down to Meyer, Birkett and “our BASSA reps”, must be identified as the architects of a betrayal.

Parslow complains that, unlike the Socialist Party, the SWP’s coverage of the deal is “too one-sided and didn’t draw a true balance sheet of the dispute”... the Socialist Party recognised that the dispute had reached an impasse...”

He then makes a pro forma call to oppose the expulsion of the SWP from the United Left, stating, “It would set a dangerous precedent that could be used against others who make criticisms of the leadership of the union, *even when made in a constructive fashion*” (emphasis added).

This for-the-record statement only emphasises the

Socialist Party's absolute loyalty to the union bureaucracy, even when they make a rare "constructive" criticism.

The present barrage of vitriol, it should be emphasised, is being levelled against a party that has worked for years as a loyal component of the bureaucratic apparatus in the United Left of Unite and a score of other unions. The SWP has responded with an abject apology, stating that because its May 21 article only "went through the details of the latest offer" and "did not attempt to go through the whole context of the dispute... We accept that this has allowed some comrades to interpret it in ways which we never intended... Far from seeking to denigrate Unite, we raise questions and criticisms about the offer because we are so committed to making sure that there continues to be a strong Unite presence at BA."

The SWP manage to state that they are "completely committed", "absolutely committed" and "want to remain" working with "other left comrades" and "comrades with a variety of views" within "Our United Left".

The SWP's belated criticism of the shameful deal struck by Unite was a face-saving exercise, forced upon it by the overt, rotten betrayal of the cabin crew dispute. The BA dispute was led into an "impasse" precisely because Unite took it there. Having repeatedly called off strikes by cabin crew, Unite was busy doing deals with the company to impose attacks on other sections of BA workers and airport staff.

In March 2010 the union, along with GMB and BALPA, agreed that staff would fund the £3.7 billion deficit in the company pensions by increasing employee contributions by 4.5 percent. In September Unite and the GMB agreed a deal for customer service staff that involved slashing 500 posts at Heathrow terminals 3 and 5. In August Unite called off a strike at the British Airports Authority, which owns six airports including Heathrow, by 8,400 ground handling staff, security and firefighters to accept a below-the-rate-of-inflation pay deal.

The statement issued by Meyer and Birkett uses the word "left" 18 times—to describe themselves, McCluskey and Unite as a whole. Nothing better illustrates how the term has come to be divorced from its real meaning.

By what measure can McCluskey be considered a "left"? The term is associated with oppositional tendencies against capitalism. It is being abused in order to provide a free pass to a section of the trade union bureaucracy to carry out the most craven betrayals.

Indeed, the agreement signed at BA is essentially no different from the type of single-union, no-strike deals struck in the 1980s by Eric Hammond of the now defunct electricians' union, the EETPU.

Today the unions have all travelled the path pioneered by Hammond. On all fundamental issues, the self-designated "left" in the unions is indistinguishable from the avowed right wing.

Nor do the language and methods employed by the United Left have anything to do with anything left or socialist. Far from representing an oppositional movement, formations such as the United Left operate as a semi-official franchise, run by and for a section of the union bureaucracy, which may or may not retain membership in what should properly be termed the ex-"left" political groups.

An extraordinarily high number of leading figures in the Socialist Party, SWP and similar groupings have integrated themselves into the highest echelons of the trade union apparatus. In these positions, they misuse terms such as "left", "militant" and "fight" only in order to better oppose the development of an independent movement of the working class and the fight for a genuine socialist perspective.

United Left members in fact make up a majority of the Unite bureaucracy, with 48 of the 80 members of its Executive. The situation is repeated in the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), the University and College Union (UCU), and elsewhere.

The working class should treat the ex-left for what it is: the representative of a privileged middle class layer of careerists in the union apparatus and academia, virulently opposed to the necessary break with unions that are dedicated to the suppression of the class struggle.



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