UK Labour leader Miliband proposes end to union block membership

Chris Marsden
12 July 2013

Labour leader Ed Miliband has utilised a set-piece confrontation over the selection of one of its parliamentary candidates to propose a change in the party's relationship with the trade unions that will make it a party "Representing the national interest."

He proposes to abandon the present arrangement, rooted in the establishment of the party by the trade unions more than a century ago, whereby members of the 16 unions affiliated to Labour automatically become members of the party and the trade union leaders then cast a block vote on their behalf. The arrangement presently covers around 3 million people, who pay £3 each.

Miliband now wants those workers who have not already opted out of paying the union's political levy, under laws introduced by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, to "opt-in" as individual party members. He has asked former General Secretary of the Labour Party Ray Collins to draw up plans to be implemented before the next general election.

He also wants to pioneer US-style primaries to allow registered "supporters" to choose candidates, trailing the move for the London mayoral elections. By doing so he hopes to attract more money from business donors and to make the case anew for state funding of political parties, which he pledged to reopen talks on if Labour is elected.

The impulse for Miliband's reformist zeal is the desire to prove to big business that Labour is right-wing enough to be trusted with government in the event of the downfall of the present Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. For historic reasons, this is couched in the language of freeing the party from the undue influence of the trade unions. But the reality is that Labour will still rely on the trade union leaders for its funds—either through signing up members to the new system or direct donations to the party.

More importantly Labour will rely upon the very trade union leaders it criticises to stifle the opposition of their members and impose the savage attacks demanded by the ruling elite.

The reaction of the trade unions to Miliband's initiative makes clear that they will continue to work hand-in-glove with Labour and the employers whatever new arrangement is cooked up regarding financing and selection procedures.

Nothing could have appeared more acrimonious than Labour's selection contest in Falkirk, Scotland. The Unite union had signed up around 100 members to the Labour Party and campaigned for its preferred candidate, as it is entitled to do under existing rules. However, the accusation was made that some had been signed up *without their knowledge who would then vote in a certain way*— a somewhat contradictory proposition. Labour then called in the police to investigate the alleged malpractice.

Unite's leader Len McCluskey, a self-designated "left" who was formerly close to the Militant Tendency and its successor organisation, the Socialist Party, was incensed. Not only had he been made the subject of a police investigation, but his claim that Labour could be pushed leftwards through a recruitment drive lay in tatters.

Writing in the *Guardian*, he hailed his union's "success" in combating the efforts of the right wing, led by the inner party think-tank and journal *Progress*, "largely funded by Lord Sainsbury, which has been sparing no expense to get its candidates adopted" and of the party leadership more generally to "parachute favoured candidates into safe seats, with the constituency party bypassed."

But McCluskey finished with a pledge of loyalty to a "stock of shared values" with Labour. "I believe that Miliband is rebuilding that stock of shared values," he wrote. "A row over selections is not going to undo that."

Following Miliband's speech, when the BBC noted the praise for Milband from former Labour leader Tony Blair for his "bold and strong" leadership, McCluskey replied,

© World Socialist Web Site

“It’s not often I agree with Tony Blair but I think he is spot on… a new relationship is something I’m very comfortable about.”

Retracting his opposition to “opting in,” he said, “The principle of what he’s saying, about making certain that individual trade unionists actually take a conscious decision to opt in to being active in the Labour party, is something that I would welcome.”

The same prostrate pose was adopted by Labour MP Tom Watson, who resigned as Labour’s campaign coordinator over Falkirk. He sent a resignation letter that was spectacular in its obsequiousness, hailing Miliband as “my friend and leader” and describing himself as “your loyal servant” who “will be with you all of the way, cheering you on from the backbenches.”

Watson endorsed arch-Blairite and Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander as Labour’s campaign co-ordinator, declaring “There are millions of people wanting Labour to win the next general election. A unified labour party is an essential component of our plan.”

Such are the forces to which workers are directed by the political representatives of the middle class pseudo-left. They argue among themselves only over whether this involves a campaign to “reclaim” the Labour Party for the working class, or whether the trade unions should now form the backbone of a new party to replace Labour.

Journalist and spokesman for the recently created People’s Assembly, Owen Jones, describes Labour as a party of the working class by virtue of its connection with the trade unions, warning that ending the link would also end “what connection with working people it still has, leaving it a rootless party, a mere plaything of vacuous careerists and apparatchiks.”

Alternatively, the Socialist Party acknowledges that Labour is already an avowed party of big business. But its concern is for the political fate of the trade union bureaucracy if they continue to maintain their political alliance with Miliband and company.

In friendly advice delivered prior to Miliband’s speech, it warned that if Unite capitulates, “This would be disastrous, not just for its political strategy but for its industrial one too. There would be growing anger and indignation in the rank and file, and doubts would be raised over the union’s commitment to fight for its policy. This would cause serious problems for Len and the left leadership of the union and jeopardise their position.”

The SP urge Unite “to take the bold step” of “disaffiliating from New Labour” because “[t]he working class has waited too long for its own party since New Labour accepted the free market and dropped its famous Clause 4, Part IV, which envisaged nationalisation and socialism.”

The reality is that nothing Miliband has done this past week is surprising. As he said regarding Labour’s historic connections with the trade unions, “Decade by decade, from Neil Kinnock to John Smith to Tony Blair, we have been changing that relationship.”

What this does not address is with what type of organisations Labour still enjoys such intimate relations with, despite its rightward evolution. The trade unions have undergone precisely the same type of political transformation as the Labour Party and have marched in lock step with it into the most intimate relations with big business. In the process they have presided over a virtually unbroken series of defeats for the working class stretching over decades. Members have left in droves, leaving behind them eviscerated shell-organisations that utilise all of their residual influence to police the working class on behalf of the government, corporations and the banks.

The last thing the working class must do is wait on the unions to forge a path independent of Labour. Any party founded by the unions would be pro-capitalist and led by proven traitors. A new workers’ party can only be constructed through a political rebellion against the trade unions, based upon a genuinely socialist and internationalist programme. The obeisance of the trade union apparatchiks before Miliband and his media backers will act as a spur to such a development.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site