

# UK: Blairite challenges Unite union leadership election result

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12 June 2017

Defeated right-wing candidate for the Unite union election, Gerard Coyne, has launched legal action against the result and his suspension.

Coyne lost the election for Unite general secretary to incumbent Len McCluskey in April. A supporter of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, McCluskey was re-elected general secretary with 59,607 votes to Coyne's 53,544.

Just 12.2 percent of union members voted in the election for the leader of Britain's largest union. With only 130,071 Unite members voting out of 1,062,049 ballots sent out, turnout was a historic low and revealed the alienation of the union members from all factions of the union bureaucracy.

In 2010, 240,000 Unite members (15.8 percent) voted in an election in which McCluskey, standing as a nominally "left" voice, won to take control of the union. In 2013, McCluskey called an early election and defeated Jerry Hicks, with turnout again falling as 225,801 (15.2 percent) of members voted.

The rejection by the membership of the latest leadership contest reflects growing hostility to a series of betrayals of their struggles by Unite. One dispute or strike after another has been isolated and sold-out, with concession after concession made to management. These include Tata steel workers, workers at auto producer BMW, British Airways cabin crew, UK oil refinery workers and IT workers at Fujitsu.

Given the national prominence of the Unite election—which was given widespread publicity as one critical to ultimately determining the leadership of the Labour Party—the collapse of turnout was even more notable. McCluskey was only able to defeat Coyne—a candidate who openly supported the despised Blairite faction of the Labour Party—by a slender margin of 45.4 percent to 41.5 percent, revealing the extent to which

all factions of the bureaucracy are reviled.

Just hours after polling closed, Coyne was suspended from his position as West Midlands regional secretary, with the BBC reporting, "Coyne is understood to be facing disciplinary proceedings for bringing the union into disrepute."

Coyne claims the Unite election was "flawed" and the voting process "subverted." His legal challenge to the vote was launched to coincide with the final week of campaigning for last week's snap general election in a backdoor effort to discredit Corbyn.

In the run-up to the general election, the Labour right insisted, in line with Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May, that Labour under Corbyn was "unelectable." Instead, the election result was a massive repudiation of May and the Tories and of the Labour right, as a shift leftwards in the population saw Corbyn receive 40 percent of the vote, preventing the Tories from forming a majority government.

Coyne taking the leadership of Unite was seen as a vital staging post in the conspiracy to remove Corbyn since the union is Labour's biggest donor. Labour raised £2.68 million during the first week of the campaign for the general election, of which fully £2.36 million—or 88 percent—came from Unite. The aim of the Blairites was to take control of the union and remove the financial backing from Corbyn.

Central to this was a campaign to discredit McCluskey. This was in full swing in the weeks running up to the Unite leadership vote. The *Guardian*'s Sunday sister paper, the *Observer*, in March, publishing a secret recording of Jon Lansman, the founder of the pro-Corbyn campaign group Momentum.

The *Observer* claimed the recording was evidence of, in the words of Labour deputy general secretary and

opponent of Corbyn, Tom Watson, a “hard-left plot” to take over Labour. Watson claimed this was to be based on Momentum securing the backing of Unite and the Communication Workers Union. Coyne declared, “This shocking revelation reveals a secret hard-left plot by Len McCluskey to seize control of the Labour party in perpetuity using cash taken from hard-working members of Unite.”

McCluskey replied that he had never even met Lansman.

Coyne, a union bureaucrat of more than 15 years standing was described in the *Financial Times* as a “close ally of Tom Watson... and standard bearer of many moderate Labour MPs who are unhappy at Mr Corbyn’s leadership.”

Coyne has impeccable credentials as an acolyte of Blair. His father-in-law is the Labour peer and right-wing former leader of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union, Bill Jordan. Jordan was described by the *Independent* in 1994 as the “most prominent right-wing trade unionist in Britain” and “one of the leading backers of Tony Blair [who had just become Labour leader] in the union movement.”

In January, Coyne attended a meeting on “trade unionism in the 21st century” in the House of Commons organised by Blairites, Chuka Umunna and Tristram Hunt. The meeting was held under the auspices of the “Labour for the Common Good” group, which was set up by Umunna, Hunt and other MPs in August 2015 when it became clear that Corbyn was set to win the Labour leadership contest.

Umunna and Hunt played leading roles in trying to remove Corbyn following his election. Umunna was widely expected to have launched a leadership challenge to Corbyn, which was described by Blairite *Guardian* columnist, Nick Cohen, as the beginning of a “counter-revolution” had Corbyn done badly in the general election—as the Labour right hoped.

The ruling elite went to extraordinary lengths in its attempt to take control of Unite, with the pages of Rupert Murdoch’s *The Sun* thrown open to Coyne to advocate his case. Coyne was backed up by a *Sun* editorial and a column by its political editor, Trevor Kavanagh. Making clear that the Get Coyne Elected campaign was integral to ensuring Labour was to be fully committed to war and austerity, Kavanagh wrote, “The stakes could not be higher. If Len McCluskey is

re-elected leader of Britain’s biggest union we can all kiss goodbye to Labour as an alternative party of government.”

Kavanagh hailed Bill Jordan and “Terry Duffy and Ken Jackson of the AUEW engineering union, now part of Unite, who were glad to write for us [The Sun].”

Labour MPs including Watson were “fighting to save the party,” he continued, warning, “This power struggle is nothing less than a fight to the death for a once noble party. Labour is doomed under its present leadership. Corbyn is a McCluskey puppet.”

These are the forces that, following the election, Corbyn is once again protecting from all censure and seeking unity with. Even prior to May calling the snap election, Corbyn issued a joint statement with Watson urging party unity—stressing with regard to Lansman and Momentum, “The leadership represents the whole party and not any one strand within it. No one speaks for the leadership except the leadership themselves and their spokespeople.”

Now, instead of attack pieces, the *Observer* features an op-ed by the pro-Labour *New Statesman*’s Helen Lewis speaking of a “change in the tide” towards unity and citing Umunna and arch-Blairite Yvette Cooper abandoning their expected leadership challenges. Corbyn is praised for having “proved willing to compromise on key issues—shoot to kill, Nato, the monarchy, Trident—and the manifesto contained very little most members of the parliamentary Labour party (PLP) found hard to defend.”



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