

# UK pseudo-left groups line-up behind rival fake “left” challengers in Unite leadership contest

Tony Robson, Chris Marsden  
25 June 2021

The election to decide who will succeed Len McCluskey as General Secretary of Unite the union has obsessed the UK’s pseudo-left groups for weeks.

Ballot papers will be sent out to over a million members from July 5 with the result to be announced on August 26. For months now the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Socialist Party (SP) and others have written numerous articles tying themselves in knots trying to portray one or other of three candidates as a genuine “left” alternative to the victory of the single open Blairite right-winger, Gerard Coyne.

Their difficulties were compounded by the adoption of Steve Turner as the favoured candidate of the Stalinist *Morning Star*/Communist Party of Britain and others within the union’s supposedly United Left. Turner was considered such damaged goods that the SP and SWP refused to endorse him and supported Howard Beckett or Sharon Graham as alternative flag bearers for the left.

Events since then have been a comedy of errors.

Unite is the UK’s second largest union, with a membership of 1.2 million. But for most members, who leads it is a matter of supreme indifference. In the 2017 election for general secretary, McCluskey only narrowly defeated Coyne by 6,000 votes. McCluskey was advanced as a left-winger and a key supporter of then Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. But he lacked any popular support among Unite members, such that turnout was just 12.2 percent. A third candidate, Ian Allinson, of the pseudo-left RS21 group, a splinter from the SWP, secured 13.2 percent of the vote as a “grassroots socialist” candidate—piling on the pressure for the “left” to agree to a single candidate this time around.

Even this would not guarantee victory, however. The pandemic has served as a pretext for big business to mount major corporate restructurings and launch a series of savage attacks on workers, including the use of “fire and rehire” contracts. Unite and its counterparts have dedicated all their efforts to stifling opposition in the working class and betraying those struggles they were unable to prevent from erupting.

As a result, alienation from the trade unions is deeper today than it ever was, meaning that the turnout may be even smaller, possibly favouring Coyne and leading to a third general secretary victory going to the right-wing after recent elections in two other major unions, Unison and the GMB.

The efforts of the SWP and SP, tactical differences aside, are all directed to buttressing illusions in the trade unions, preventing workers drawing any lessons from these experiences and understanding the transformation of these organisations into an

industrial police force for the corporations.

To this end the SWP and SP both claim that there is a “left legacy” to defend from McCluskey’s tenure as leader of Unite since 2010 and present the union as a vehicle for working-class opposition and a counterweight to the right-wing of the Labour Party.

This is a version of history with the truth redacted. Coyne has returned like Banquo’s ghost as the declared ally of Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, whom he praises for having “displayed a sure touch on the major issues he has faced in his first year, and I think he should be given the support to help Labour win power in the interests of working people.”

But Starmer’s path to leadership of the Labour Party was paved by the Corbynites. The real legacy of McCluskey and Corbyn was to have insured that the right-wing kept control of the Labour Party, having used whatever “left” credentials they had to insist on party unity and to oppose calls for the Blairites to be driven out.

On the industrial front, moreover, Unite has an unbroken record of betrayals, including of recent struggles against fire and rehire. One of McCluskey’s final acts as general secretary was to directly intervene in the strike by 400 Manchester bus drivers against Go North West to impose a sellout. The indefinite 11-week strike action was ended based on the agreement he signed with the chief executive of Go North West parent company Go-Ahead, David Brown, guaranteeing the overhaul of terms and conditions without having to resort to firing and then rehiring the drivers.

Coyne only narrowly scraped through the qualification criteria for achieving ballot status of securing the support of at least 5 percent of branches, the equivalent of 172 nominations, with a total of 196. But the “left” vote was split three ways—with Steve Turner securing 525, followed by Sharon Graham with 349, and Howard Beckett with 328.

Normally the pseudo-left would be more easily persuaded to sink their differences and take a unified stand behind a single candidate. But Turner cannot credibly be advanced as a “left”. A member of the Militant Tendency in his youth, the forerunner of today’s Socialist Party, he now boasts of his political “realism” in opposing any challenge to the Labour right and working “constructively” with the Conservative government.

He told the *Huffington Post* in April, “The Tories are in power and the Tories hold the pen on decisions. I’m engaging with [business secretary] Kwasi Kwarteng now on GKN and Liberty Steel. I’m in the room, I’m at the table, I’m not outside lobbing bricks over the wall.”

More telling still was his recent statement, “It angers me sometimes, that some of the union’s campaigning right now is pitched against our

mayors, against Sadiq Khan and Andy Burnham. What's that all about? I find that incredible that we would do that."

All Unite did in fact was to urge the Labour Mayors in London and Manchester to ban the practice of fire and rehire in the contracts they sign with the private sector—a token face-saving gesture—under conditions where Go North West workers in Manchester were on indefinite strike and Unite was winding down bus drivers' strikes or preventing them at RATP and Metroline in London.

The efforts of the SWP and SP to hold up Beckett and Graham as alternatives to Coyne and Turner has been an unmitigated disaster.

Beckett, from the standpoint of rhetoric alone, comes closest to the picture of a traditional "left" bureaucrat—with a raft of "end" this and "fight" for that in his manifesto. He was, moreover, McCluskey's chosen successor and an avowed supporter of Corbyn. He presented himself as something of a firebrand, clashing with Home Secretary Priti Patel over the inhumane treatment of asylum seekers, tweeting that she "should be deported, not refugees"—for which he was suspended from the Labour Party amid accusations of racism. He was also the only candidate prepared to openly criticise Starmer, tweeting on June 9, "Boris Johnson & Keir Starmer, I have a message for you both. We won't stand idly by while you dump the pandemic fall out on the working class. We will fight back."

Beckett suffered accusations that his left pose was insincere—coming from a property millionaire who sold his legal company to Unite's own legal representatives for a tidy sum—and that he did not have much of a base in the union apparatus outside Scotland. He is also just as implicated in the betrayals and isolations of the most bitter struggles against fire and rehire, including at British Airways. Fronting Unite's campaign against fire and rehire based on appealing to the Conservative government to outlaw the practice, he stated in a press release, "The government has to get on the same page as voters on this and fast."

In the end, however, this record didn't matter. Beckett's left pretensions were exposed when, on June 18, he withdrew his candidacy in favour of backing Turner just before the ballot papers were issued. In a joint statement the two declared that safeguarding Unite's "unique role" as a "fighting back, progressive, campaigning force for working people... requires the unity of the left in our union..."

The Socialist Party had commissioned a statement from Beckett that it published under the heading, "The movement needs a revolution". It hailed him as having, "led the political opposition to Starmer within Labour, including on the party's national executive committee (NEC)", adding that Turner had "deliberately counter-posed himself to Howard Beckett's opposition to Starmer" and would likely move Unite "to the right both politically and industrially" if he won. Their declared opposites are now campaigning jointly on a "blended manifesto".

This has left the SP with no choice but to stand fully behind the SWP's favoured candidate Sharon Graham, whose "left" credentials appear to consist of little more than a declared intention of taking Unite "back to the workplace" and criticising the union for being tied to "Westminster politics" and "internal wrangling" within the Labour Party.

Aside from a few presentational points, this is identical to Coyne's declaration that he "is sick and tired of Unite messing about with Westminster politics and trying to be a backseat driver of the Labour Party." It has no other possible interpretation than as a pledge not to challenge Labour's continued rightward lurch under Starmer.

Moreover, the "back to the workplaces" manifesto of the self-

proclaimed "workers' candidate" is a version of the corporatist policy pursued by Unite and endorsed by both Coyne and Turner. She is the executive member for Organisation and Leverage in Unite. The term "leverage" is synonymous with seeking company-wide and industry wide agreements that preserve the bureaucracy's position as corporate partners imposing labour discipline and preventing strikes, arguing instead for securing the backing of shareholders, politicians, newspapers and other "agents of influence".

As opposed to calling for a unified struggle across companies and industries, Graham boasted in the pages of the *Socialist Worker*, "Over the last ten years I have developed a new comprehensive approach to campaigns. It is called Unite Leverage and it delivers." She continues, "The site manager doesn't decide the big issues. The CEO does... The only way for unions to win at the workplace is to have a coherent bargaining strategy."

The "victories" she credits herself with are wins for the bureaucracy, not Unite's members. The deal at British Airways (BA) for example, led to the loss of 4,000 airline jobs. Go North West's strike was ended after Unite agreed to £1.3 million in cuts and measures that will guarantee job losses.

The SWP and SP know all this very well. The SWP said of its backing for Graham, "The slogan 'back to the workplace' can be a call for militancy and backing workers' resistance. But it can also be a backward demand for retreating from wider political struggles, or not challenging right wing Labour leader Keir Starmer." They neglected to say which alternative interpretation was correct.

Arguing for her to still stand after Beckett ceded to Turner, they wrote politely on June 11, "We have criticisms of some of her approach, and her reluctance systematically to take up wider political issues," while regurgitating Graham's various slogans as proof she can lead a "shift in the union" that benefits the working class.

Should Graham also back down in favour of Turner, or if Turner wins, then the SP and SWP will fall into line. As the SP declared in a de facto oath of loyalty, "if this did happen, we would not be neutral but give very critical support to Steve Turner."

Whoever becomes general secretary, nothing will be fundamentally altered as far as the pseudo-left groups are concerned. They will continue in their assigned role as loyal "critics" of the bureaucracy, urging they be "pressurised" into more militant action to prevent the emergence of independent political opposition in the working class. And nothing will change for workers. Unite will still act as a hostile force, dedicated to the suppression of the class struggle on behalf of the major corporations, the Tory government and innumerable Labour-controlled local authorities.

A genuine and viable left movement is only possible when workers break free of the political stranglehold of the corporatist syndicates that still masquerade as trade unions and take the road of independent industrial and political struggle. This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees—genuinely democratic organisations of class struggle which will unify workers across all sectional and national divisions on a socialist and internationalist perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**