

The election of Andrea Egan as Unison leader: Another false dawn of a left revival under the union bureaucracy

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The election of “left” candidate Andrea Egan as general secretary of Unison has been presented in the media and by the UK’s pseudo-left groups as a turning point for Britain’s largest trade union and a rebuke of the Starmer Labour government.

In fact, Egan’s electoral victory amid mass abstention reveals that the left-wing of the union bureaucracy commands little to no credibility in the working class, despite the deep unpopularity of the most pro-business and right-wing Labour government in history. Up against Christina McAnea—a close ally of the Starmer government who has resolutely opposed any mobilisation of Unison’s 1.3 million mainly public sector members against pay erosion, job losses and austerity—Egan won just 58,353 votes against McAnea’s 39,353: an overall turnout of just 7 percent.

More damning still is that this figure was the latest in a series of record-lows going back at least as far as 1995, when turnout was 20 percent—the previous contest saw 10 percent of members vote. Election to the highest post in Unison, as in every other union, is decided by an ever-declining constituency of union members, themselves part of a shrinking unionised percentage of the workforce. The union bureaucracy’s decades of serving as a pro-company apparatus has driven the overwhelming majority of workers to vote with their feet.

This has been either glossed over or ignored by the mainstream media and by the pseudo-left, who have pointed to Egan’s criticism of Labour’s “reactionary political agenda” and promises to be take a more militant approach to industrial relations as proof of a fundamental change.

But there is nothing in Egan’s record to suggest a

decisive break with the Labour government, let alone a sustained campaign of opposition. Her “Time to Win” platform argued instead for “a comprehensive review” of Unison’s relationship with Labour to ensure “value for money”, as if the jury is still out on the character of Starmer’s privatising, militarist, authoritarian, genocide-supporting, austerity government.

Speaking with Novara Media, Egan made very clear she supports the same tired old programme of “pressuring” the Labour Party: “Somebody said to me in an interview, ‘Do you just want to embarrass the Labour party?’” she said. “The answer to that is no: I want to hold its feet to the fire. They are supposed to be a working-class political party.”

This is said after the party expelled her—following 12 years of membership—in 2022 for sharing two articles on social media from Socialist Appeal, the newspaper of the then International Marxist Tendency (IMT). Having been denied an appeal, “even though every six months I write to them,” she told Labour List, she now supports Jeremy Corbyn and Zarah Sultana’s Your Party as a “shot across the bow” of Starmer’s government.

Egan has praised Labour’s Mayor of Manchester Andy Burnham, a potential Starmer replacement, in total disregard for her own members: 400 Unison tram and bus workers currently on strike against a below-inflation 3.2 percent pay deal by Transport for Greater Manchester which Burnham oversees. Workers across the region have been in revolt over low pay and exhaustion imposed by private operators under Burnham’s pro-market franchising model, and he has relied on Unite and Unison to demobilise the fight.

As for Egan’s “strike-ready” claims, during her

campaign she pledged to build on Unison's fraudulent "Organising to Win" strategy, claiming it had "started to put money in the pockets of our members"—in the same year as the union imposed another real-terms pay cut on tens of thousands of NHS staff of just 3.6 percent. A mass rejection was neutered by restricting the ballot to a consultative vote.

Decades of similar actions have seen Unison members suffer a 30 percent erosion in their pay since 2010, with Egan taking a position on the union's National Executive Council in 2017 and as the union's president in 2022.

What Egan's promises to put employers "on notice" and "challenge" the Labour Party really amount to has already been demonstrated by Sharon Graham, general secretary of the UK's second-largest union Unite. Hailed by the pseudo-left as the "Workers' Candidate" in the 2021 election, amid her threats to withdraw union funding to the Labour Party and lead a Unite which "fights for workers", she won the vote with the votes of less than 4 percent of the membership.

Nearly five years on, not only have threats to cancel Labour's funding proved hollow, but Graham has demobilised multiple powerful struggles across many sectors nationwide. This culminated in the vital part the Unite bureaucracy played in shutting down the national strike wave of 2022-24, allowing Starmer's right-wing government a smooth passage into power, and industrial peace thereafter.

In Birmingham, Graham's leadership has isolated the year-long fight by refuse workers against the destruction of their jobs and pay, making continuous appeals to a Labour Party whose local council is organising a major strike-breaking operation backed by the Starmer government.

None of this features in the writing of the pseudo-left, who claim like the Socialist Workers Party that Egan's victory "means ordinary Unison members are at long last taking charge of our union". Even putting aside Egan's actual record, the reality this ignores is that she has come to the head of a husk of an organisation: a labour management apparatus so divorced from the interests of its members that barely more than one in 20 cast a vote for its general secretary.

No genuine popular base or movement is reflected in her election. Just six months ago, the Time for Real Change (TFRC) faction of which Egan is a part lost

control of Unison's NEC to the right-wing, in a vote with an 8.9 percent turnout at best.

At the time, the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) criticised its vacuous appeals for a "positive but challenging" relationship with Labour as "not exactly a galvanising call-to-arms for a militant fightback against austerity," only to declare Egan's victory "a potential resounding transformation of Britain's industrial landscape." What was condemned as paralysing in June is hailed as a breakthrough in December!

TFRC's task is now, supposedly, "clearing out all the bureaucrats: placing all elected officials on the average workers' wage; electing all officials that work for the union on slates; vetting their expenses; and subjecting them to the immediate right of recall. Egan's only weapon to carry this through is to mobilise the ranks of the union..."

Nothing of the sort is on offer. But the RCP and company will grab at any opportunity to declare a new dawn for the labour movement under one or another left-talker: the fantasy of a top-down transformation of the unions through bureaucratic self-reform.

A real revival of working-class struggle and democracy requires the development of a rank-and-file insurgency to break the grip of the union bureaucracy: networks and organisations which restore power to the shop floor and enable workers to wage unified struggles across sectors, localities and borders on the basis of their needs not what the profit demands of the capitalist oligarchy dictate. This is the socialist and internationalist programme advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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