

# The End of an Enduring Alliance? Trade Union-Labour Relations

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## Introduction

The unions and Labour were believed by most until recently to have a relationship that went together like fish and chips or bread and butter; organic, symmetrical and ever lasting in the slow pursuit of progressive common goals. The unions were the economic wing of the “labour and trade union movement”, the Labour Party the political wing of the “labour and trade union movement”. Leading union activists and lay officials were predominantly Labour Party activists, if not also constituency office holders and elected councillors. At a higher level, a good proportion of Labour MPs until the late 1990s were former paid union officers and lay officials.

By late 2004, the traditional destination of union political affiliation is now more under question than at any time since the Labour Party was founded at the end of the beginning of the twentieth century. A similar pattern of unfolding events is occurring in some other countries where labour or social democratic parties are now experiencing significant fissures and splits (e.g. Germany). The period that has now been entered is unlike any other before.

This article examines two primary issues. First, whether the current strains and conflict in the relationship are temporary or evidence of an irrevocable and terminal parting of the ways. Second, whether the alternative to affiliation to Labour must necessarily and immediately mean affiliation to another political party.

## Current State of Play

Despite the apparent hegemony of Labour in the unions because the majority of large unions such as the Amicus, CWU, GMB, TGWU and USDAW are affiliated to Labour, there exists a diversity of positions throughout the union movement. Unison has an idiosyncratic form of affiliation dating from its creation from NALGO, NUPE and COHSE where it has a general political fund and an affiliated political fund. There are unions like

the PCS, NUT and Unifi which are not affiliated and never have been whilst there are also unions that do not have political funds with which to affiliate to any political party like the NUJ but do engage in political campaigning.

Finally, there are the RMT and FBU. The RMT has been disaffiliated from Labour for allowing its branches to affiliate to political parties other than Labour. But it is to contest this disaffiliation in the High Court shortly, citing a breach of natural justice for it has not been told which rule it has broken. It has also affiliated to the Labour Representation Committee, the internal Labour group established by a number of left-wing MPs. So far 7 RMT branches in Scotland and the Scottish Regional Council have affiliated to the Scottish Socialist Party, while one has voted to affiliate (subject to National Executive approval) to Forward Wales led by former MP John Marek AM as had ten in England to Respect. However, the leadership of the RMT is known to have not inconsiderable reservations about Respect so neither affiliation of these branches to it nor others in the future is guaranteed. Bob Crow has made sympathetic statements about the Green Party.

In the case of the FBU, it disaffiliated from Labour, opening up the possibility of funding these other left-of-centre parties. The London Region of the FBU had already voted to support Respect while the Scottish Region may providing funding to the SNP, and the Hartlepool branch has donated money to Respect. However, the way in which the FBU disaffiliated left it in a state of inertia until its conference next year by virtue of the motion passed requiring the union to organise a conference bringing discontented trade unionists together. Moreover, the method by which FBU branches can apply to affiliate to other parties is through the union’s national executive (like with the RMT) but some fear that this will be used by the Gilchrist leadership, which is of a “reclaim Labour” position and has instituted a purge of the harder left in the union, to block affiliations

to other parties. Elsewhere, the Scotland No.2 branch of the CWU has also affiliated to the SSP while a Welsh CWU branch voted to support Respect.

#### Political Fault Line

The major political fault line running through the union movement concerns whether unions should fight to “reclaim” Labour from “new Labour”, whether this is achievable or whether they should open up their political funds to other parties to the left of Labour. These parties include not just the SSP but also Respect, Forward Wales, the Greens, SNP and Plaid Cymru. The opening of funds may be through disaffiliation or democratisation of the political fund allowing a plurality of parties, including Labour, to be supported.

The “reclaim Labour” school of thought comprises the leaders of all the major affiliated unions (save USDAW), many of which are also members of the so-called “awkward squad”. Apart from the Labour left like the Campaign Group and the Campaign for Socialism, the Communist Party/*Morning Star* also takes this line. Their argument is threefold: “new” Labour is a clique which can be easily removed because it has no roots in the party, the level of local party activity is so low as to give unions a free run in “taking over” the Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) and by working together national unions can exercise a disproportionate influence. Opinion varies on whether Blair must be replaced and on who should succeed him.

The premise of this is that Labour remains the “only show in town” and that being outside it is to be “outside the labour movement” and without influence. What are the merits of this case? The first concerns the practicality of staging a palace coup: when the unions came together at recent party conferences and policy forums they were able to turn over the Labour leadership. Second, taking an approach of gaining “best value” to funding Labour and determining the election manifesto may provide some recourse where Labour is in deep in debt and business donations have considerably dried up. Third, there are some signs the major unions are collectively developing an alternative economic and political strategy that they hope to present as an alternative election manifesto.

Set against these are important counter-considerations. Prime amongst these is that the Labour leadership is not bound by party democracy and that away from conference it carries on as it pleases. Other non-union forces are either more powerful and/or the leadership is more receptive to them. This raises the question of whether “new” Labour can be held

to account between conferences. It can be doubted whether there are sufficient numbers of highly motivated union activists to take over the CLPs and whether this would make much of a difference if achieved given two factors. The first concerns the administrative controls of a centralised party administration, the other parts of the electoral college that the Labour leadership can call on, and many of the new members who are inactive but may vote in elections are “Blair-ites”. The second is that taking over moribund CLPs is not like raiding an arsenal: it would not give an immediate army of shock troops with which to march.

#### The Warwick National Policy Forum

Does the compromise forced on the leadership at the National Policy Forum in July 2004 at Warwick University make any difference to this equation? Taking the comments of Tony Woodley, the most prominent and far sighted of the “reclaim Labour” position, as a rule of thumb, the results of Warwick have varied from “considerable” to “crumbs” (see various writings in *Campaign Group News*, *Guardian*, *Morning Star*, *Tribune* and *Socialist Worker* since July). Many of the fifty-odd policy commitments given from the list of over seventy demands were existing policy commitments that had not yet been acted upon, and many of the new ones were only minor ones. The big issues of repealing the anti-union laws, ending PFI and instituting progressive taxation were not touched upon.

The most favourable light that Warwick can be cast in is that in the run-up to a general election where Labour is only neck and neck with the Tories and with its finance and internal organisation in a poor state, one could say that Labour was particularly susceptible to such union pressure but only at the margins. The jury is still out on whether this means that Labour is now open to further influence from the unions, and particularly so in the period after a general election. A temporary lull in hostilities between the union and Labour leaderships is likely to break out on this basis after a season of open warfare. Most unions will probably wait to see what happens next. Of course, no commitment was given to not sack thousands of civil servants, to provide student grants or not continue with a right-wing law and order agenda. Shortly afterwards several events are worth noting. While Blair told the TUC Congress he “had come not to bury Warwick but to praise it”, at the Labour conference the four big unions saved Blair from defeat over setting an early date for troop withdrawal from Iraq as a payback for Warwick. Lastly, the Labour conference voted to renationalise the railways but the leadership immediately

made it clear that it would ignore this.

Outside Labour: Outside the Tent?

Is being outside Labour being outside the “tent”? Does leaving Labour necessitate joining others? First of all we need to consider what is being outside the “tent”. The unions made Labour in their own image as a result of requiring independent parliamentary representation. In that sense, the unions are perfectly free to remake the form of their political representation, that is, to create another “tent”. Clearly, there is a possibility of the depoliticisation or apoliticalisation in disaffiliation but this is latent rather than real given several factors. Unions are leading the political opposition to Labour and are likely to remain so as long as Labour is in power and the Tories and Liberals stay weak. Moreover, the unions recognise they need political representation and this can take many forms other than Labour or other political parties. A number of unions campaign politically and obtain representation without affiliation.

The RMT has found like many unions there was no leeway for compromise within Labour or progress for left-wing policies. Now outside Labour, it is hard to conceive of it as being any less influential than before. But, nonetheless, is it any stronger now? Does it provide a model for other unions? The SSP, as the most advanced political left formation in Britain (politically and by size) does not have sufficient parliamentary representation to significantly advance the RMT's interests. It only operates in Scotland (sic) and in a situation where many important matters are reserved business. Neither can the SSP construct sufficiently wide alliances within civic society (i.e. outside parliament) to do so. If this lack of is true of the SSP, it is all the more true of Respect, the Greens and Forward Wales. This is why the SNP and Plaid Cymru look much more appealing to many union activists and full-time officers. Despite their rightward drift in recent years, they are much bigger and more credible. Indeed, since the return of Salmond, the SNP may appear a lot more attractive.

However, the SSP and others can potentially use their parliamentary representation and their general profile to raise the case of the unions in extra-parliamentary campaigning. Here their key resource is the size of their party memberships and the extent of activity of these members. This offers the distant possibility of trying to build a mass or popular coalition or movement that can exert influence on parliament and government from without, no matter which political party is in government. Currently, unions are between a rock and a hard place. The old way of representation through

Labour no longer works (to the extent it did) but a new method and form does not yet exist.

Consequently, it may be more sensible to see the realignment of the left and unions as a long-term project which should not be judged in the short term on just whether it can deliver large-scale political representation on a par with that which hypothetically exists with Labour. The appropriate historical parallel here would be the twenty to thirty years that it took for the Labour Party to become an effective political force at the beginning of the twentieth century. If this is the case, it suggests that unions that go down this non-Labour or not exclusively Labour route will need to advance their interests in an analogous way in the industrial and social spheres. Whilst this would not mean a syndicalist approach per se, it would mean a much heavier emphasis on recruitment, organising, collective bargaining and membership mobilisations. Alongside this, the union movement would become a social movement where the route to having strength in the workplace is not always directly via the workplace but also through communities and social networks. It would be the organiser and tribune of the people for gaining social justice, democracy and liberty.

Industrial and social strength would compensate for current conventional political weakness and out of it greater political strength could be created. Unions, in essence, could adopt the strategy of demanding “x” or “y” or else! This would see them use their industrial and social muscle for political ends. Each side of this orientation (political, social, industrial) is risk laden because there is no guarantee that either or both can be achieved. Thus, it is just as possible that unions will not be able to gain adequately extensive political representation and/or rebuild themselves industrially and socially.

The big four unions (Amicus, GMB, TGWU, Unison) have already begun to displace the TUC as the representative of organised labour in relations with the Labour Party and the Labour government, and have established themselves as a pole of attraction for many of the other smaller, left-led unions. They have viewed the TUC as insufficiently robust in its dealings with the government and too ideologically entrenched in the perspective of social partnership. This development could be taken further by these four unions drawing up their own political programme in the form of a revisited Alternative Economic Strategy. Tony Woodley appears the most able to do so in terms of setting out a social democratic or democratic socialist vision of an alternative society. However, the signs of a full-blown manifesto involving a critique of “new”

Labour, an alternative vision and a means of achieving have not been forthcoming. Warwick may have ironically stymied them from doing so.

Conclusion: Catch 22?

One key reason for viewing the process as a long-term realignment is the "Catch 22" situation that exists. Many unions, judged by their rulebooks, members' interests and leaderships' politics, have much in common with the policies of the SSP and the like. They all coalesce around policies associated with "old" Labour and social democracy. But agreement is not sufficient on its own. The SSP still lacks the credibility of critical mass because of its relatively small size. Without further union affiliation and support, other unions will not see the SSP as a credible option. Moreover, and without further union support, the SSP will not grow to the extent that it would need to in order to present itself a genuinely mass party of the working class with elected officials and leading members in different

spheres of life. For Respect, the cool, if not hostile, response from the RMT national leaders like Bob Crow and Pat Sikorski may prevent it from making the advance that the SSP has been able to. If this is so, at the very least, it will take longer for Respect to grow and entrench itself. Winning a good percentage of the vote and a few councillors will not change this.

If the clock could be wound forward several years so that we could look back in hindsight, it would be probably be safe to say that whatever the eventual outcome of the unfolding union-Labour relationship, whether estrangement, separation or divorce, we are witnessing a crisis of the sort that Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci conceptualised. This means an organic and prolonged one, rather than a short and sharp one. Britain could begin to move towards the fragmentation of union political affiliation like that which has existed in a number of European countries like France, Italy and Spain. "Slow burn" as opposed to a "big bang" might then be the best characterisation. ■

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