

UK Socialist Party backs Len McCluskey reelection in UNITE union

By Paul Stuart
26 January 2013

On January 3 the Socialist Party (SP) web site boasted of a meeting between its general secretary, Peter Taaffe, and Len McCluskey, the general secretary of Britain's largest trade union UNITE. McCluskey sought and won SP support in his anti-democratic bid to bring forward by three years the next election for his post in order to secure for himself a longer term in office.

The SP wrote, "This move has been agreed after wide consultation on the left, including ourselves. Peter Taaffe and Rob Williams had a two-hour meeting with Len McCluskey where he asked for our party's endorsement of the steps he was preparing to take."

"Because of his age, realistically he would otherwise be a 'one-term' general secretary," it explained.

For McCluskey to consult the SP leadership proves he considers them to be a useful political tool. In turn the SP's article is an advertisement directed to the entire union bureaucracy that they are open for business.

On the rare occasion the trade union bureaucracy permits a strike to take place, the SP never miss an opportunity to send letters of "solidarity" that are just as quickly followed by describing the unions' inevitable betrayals as "partial" or "short-lived" victories. The 2011 strikes by British Airways (BA) workers against productivity drives and job losses, the electricians' dispute, the oil tanker drivers struggle and the pensions fight are examples.

At BA, UNITE forced through a veritable scabs' charter that gave the company everything it had demanded and more and was described by McCluskey as "honourable". In March 2010, it agreed BA staff would fund the £3.7 billion company pension deficit with increased contributions. In August it called off a strike at the British Airports Authority by 8,400

workers and accepted a pay deal. In September UNITE agreed a deal for customer service staff, slashing 500 posts at Heathrow terminal.

Commenting on the BA deal, Keven Parslow, convenor of the Socialist Party's UNITE caucus, made clear that they would not allow anyone, above all the so-called "lefts" from McCluskey down to "our BASSA reps", to be identified as the architects of a betrayal. Instead, the SP agreed with McCluskey that the dispute "had reached an impasse."

The Taaffe/McCluskey meeting is not the first time the SP has publicised details of requests for assistance by the bureaucracy. Last March, ahead of local elections for Southampton City Council, the local Labour Party offered the SP's electoral front TUSC (Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition) a political alliance. So nervous was Labour over its electoral chances that it urged TUSC to withdraw its candidates from certain wards. The SP urged a conference where "we could then decide who best to stand as candidates."

A deal only failed to materialise because Labour officials "dismissed out of hand" TUSC's suggestion that some Labour candidates stand down.

The SP's account of its discussion with UNITE does not specify what quid pro quo agreement was on the table, but the SP at the very least has secured its place as a trusted retainer at McCluskey's court. McCluskey has a long association with the SP and its forerunner the Militant Tendency, based in Liverpool, stretching back to the 1980s. He learned early on that its support would facilitate his rise up through the ranks of the bureaucracy.

In turn the SP acts as McCluskey's lawyers and apologists. Noting that some like Jerry Hicks, who is backed by the rival Socialist Workers Party, "have tried

to argue that the early election is undemocratic and smacks of past sharp practice”, it declares in a priceless formulation, “But we have to frankly explain that it’s not just a case of what is done but who does it and for what reasons.”

Since when has opposition to anti-democratic measures been a tactical question?

It goes on to claim that under McCluskey “Despite Unite’s weaknesses” there have been “innumerable” “victories” even if “partial and/or short-lived.”

McCluskey is in fact a specialist in using left rhetoric to obscure right-wing policies ever since he was elected in November 2010 with the SP’s support on an abysmal 16 percent turnout.

It is impossible to detail all of his betrayals, but the 2011/12 struggle of electricians against building companies tearing up their working conditions and imposing a 35 percent wage cut is illustrative.

Electricians founded a rank-and-file committee to combat the trade unions’ collaboration with the construction corporations. However the SP, SWP and their ilk turned electricians back behind the trade union officials, pushing for an “official” strike ballot that applied to only half the workers at only one of the companies involved, Balfour Beatty (BBES). Even then UNITE did everything it could to delay and prevent any action. It rushed to reach an agreement with BBES and issued a joint statement that the dispute “is causing serious concern within the industry and threatens to escalate into a damaging conflict”. McCluskey emphasised the priorities of UNITE: “The construction industry is central to our national economic recovery, which is why Unite regards stable industrial relations across the sector as critical.”

Not one official strike was organised by UNITE in seven months. Instead, when the firms issued new work contracts, the union merely instructed workers to return them unsigned or send them back with a letter of protest that they had signed under duress. By early February, the companies were declaring that 88 percent of workers had signed the new contracts.

The SP declared this debacle a “priceless victory”.

The SP has proclaimed “some” disagreement with McCluskey over his support for Labour, urging him to “break the link with New Labour”.

It is politely declining to support a vicious right-wing party of the financial elite, while making clear that such

“disagreements” will not interfere with its rotten political alliance with McCluskey.

Days later, on January 15, McCluskey spoke at the London School of Economics stressing that “As the working class reasserts itself, Labour is the natural, historic, vehicle for their voice. Every Labour victory has been based on an alliance. And that is the alliance I see delivering a victory for Labour in 2015.”

He applauded Labour leader Ed Miliband for his adoption of Conservative “One Nation” rhetoric “for the way he has raised this idea ... and for the content he is trying to give it.”

The SP’s endorsement of McCluskey has been followed by all the pseudo-left groups except the SWP, who are backing long-time fellow thinker Jerry Hicks. For its impudence, the SWP has been expelled from the UNITE United Left caucus. A statement issued by the caucus pays “a special tribute to Frank Wood, UNITE Executive Council member for Health, who has immediately renounced his membership of the SWP following this weekend’s decision and will be backing Len. Thank you Frank for your courage and your conviction. You are welcome back into the fold and may others like you follow swiftly as well.”

The top personnel of the pseudo left groups are nothing less than a special detachment of the highly privileged upper echelons of the union apparatus, tasked with painting in left and socialist colours policies, programmes and individuals that are virulently hostile to even the most basic interests of working class.

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