

# British Labour Party ends block union membership

By Robert Stevens  
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UK Labour Party leader Ed Miliband easily won a vote at a specially convened weekend conference to change the party's existing relationship with the trade unions, ending their block membership. Last July Miliband proposed to end the system whereby members of the 14 unions affiliated to Labour automatically become members of the party, with trade union leaders then casting a block vote on their behalf. That arrangement covered around 2.7 million people, who paid £3 each.

Union members would still pay an annual levy of about £8 to a "political fund". However, £3 would no longer automatically be handed to Labour and would only be paid by union members who individually affiliated to the party.

Labour's existing Electoral College for leadership elections was ended, with delegates voting to abolish the system giving unions, party members and Members of Parliament and the European Parliament a third of the votes each, in favour of one member, one vote (OMOV).

The new leadership voting rules will be put in place this year, with any resulting change to the party's funding phased in over five years. Until then Labour will still automatically receive about £8 million a year from the unions.

Miliband said that the moves to implement OMOV were the "biggest changes to our party since 1918", the year that Labour adopted its Clause IV committing it to the "common ownership of the means of production" and when individual membership was first introduced. But all claims that the vote was "historic" ring hollow. Given the character of the modern Labour Party it was a foregone conclusion.

With the main changes, part of a report by Lord Collins, already passed by Labour's National

Executive Committee (NEC) and recommended to the conference, the action was approved by a majority of over 86 percent after less than two hours of "debate". The major unions were on board, with Miliband winning 96 percent of the union votes. He had barely any opposition from Labour's constituency parties, winning 76 percent of their votes.

Clause IV was abolished by then-leader Tony Blair almost two decades ago, with the resounding support of party members, as part of Blair's New Labour ditching its past reformist programme. Since then, Labour has evolved irrevocably into a right-wing party of big business, indistinguishable from the Conservatives—its members as distant from socialism as the man in the moon.

The changes were endorsed by Blair who said, "It is a long overdue reform that ... was something I should have done myself." Blair, now a multimillionaire, has hinted that he will make a substantial donation to Labour.

Lord David Owen donated £7,500 to Labour, despite being an Independent in the House of Lords. Owen, along with three other prominent Labourites, left the party in a right-wing split in 1981 to form the Social Democratic Party.

Miliband made the changes not because he really believes that the party is "in thrall" to the trade unions, but to signal to the ruling elite that Labour in government is ready to do whatever is necessary. The trade union leaders readily agreed, because they head organisations that function as arms of big business and government in suppressing opposition in the working class.

A succession of union general secretaries, including Len McCluskey and Dave Prentis from the two largest unions, Unite and Unison, pledged their ongoing,

unding support to Labour at the conference. Speaking to the BBC, with the arm of Blair's former deputy leader John Prescott around him, Prentis said, "Our money will remain. They will get our affiliation fees." He added, "The trade unions will be at the heart of the party in the next five years and in the next 50 years."

It was left to the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) to mount a pathetic lobby outside the conference opposing the changes, with a small number holding up placards declaring, "Don't let Labour silence trade unions."

On its face, the lobby is a farce, given that TUSC is the creation of the pseudo-left Socialist Party (SP), which some years ago acknowledged that Labour was no longer a reformist "workers' party" and called for the building of a new one. In addition, its most prominent figure is Bob Crow, the leader of the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union, which was kicked out of the Labour Party in 2004 for the "crime" of allowing part of its political fund to be used to back the Scottish Socialist Party!

In reality, the RMT is only a very reluctant critic of the Labour Party's more right-wing excesses and is still affiliated to Labour at the constituency level and through its backing of the Labour Representation Committee. As for the SP, having secured an unprincipled agreement for an electoral front with the RMT, they have their eye on a bigger prize—a share of the political levy, which is predicated on convincing the bureaucracy that they can be trusted.

To this end, they have used Miliband's proposals to reassure the union bureaucracy that their own manoeuvres proceed solely within the framework of rhetorical criticism of Labour, opposing any genuine political break by the working class from the stranglehold of the bureaucracy.

Prior to the conference, the SP wrote an open letter to Unite's Executive Council, in which they pleaded with the union to reject Miliband's proposals and called for the union to disaffiliate from the Labour Party and support TUSC.

Most of the letter is framed as a friendly appeal to Len McCluskey, the bureaucrat playing the main role in claiming that Labour can be won for the working class through individual affiliation, declaring, "We intend to go out and persuade our members actively to a whole host of different mediums to join the Labour

Party" and that it was now "central to Unite's political strategy."

The SP asks "Len" to recognise that the task ahead is the creation of a new political vehicle, in which "the unions would play a critical role." They cite *Daily Mirror* associate editor Kevin Maguire, who said that up to £4 million might be on offer from some unions under Labour's new funding arrangements which could "fund a rival party."

In raptures they write, "We couldn't have put it better ourselves!" adding, "Imagine the impact TUSC would have with a fraction of that £4 million?"

Just so that everyone concerned is clear on what is being offered, the SP reassures the bureaucracy that, whereas they "as a distinct Marxist current," will supposedly "argue and campaign for a socialist programme" to confront the capitalist crisis, the new political formation would have a different function: "At least as a short-term by-product, it could also act as a left check on Labour."

Any party led by a section of the trade union bureaucracy in alliance with groups such as the Socialist Party would in reality be a "check" on the working class, purpose-built to oppose the establishment of a genuine socialist alternative to Labour.

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