

Socialist Campaign to Stop the Tories and Fascists Vote Abbott - and organise!

A delegate at the Unison Labour Link conference (2 July) reports that at the Labour leadership hustings there Diane Abbott offered a clear alternative to the ex-Cabinet candidates on privatisation, PFI, low pay, and housing - but was no stronger on trade union freedom than the others.

The report sums up why socialists should support Diane Abbott in the contest, but also organise around our own clear policies, criticising Diane Abbott where necessary and not relying on her.

Diane Abbott did support the Trade Union Freedom Bill when John McDonnell introduced it in 2006. When questioned by "Unions Together", she was the only one of the candidates who would say even as much as: "the next Labour leader must commit to doing away with a legal situation where courts can halt strikes on a technicality about the trade union's ballot". But she has yet to come out in public support of the new Private Member's Bill proposed by John McDonnell which does exactly that.

The system where 33 MPs' nominations are needed to get a candidate on the ballot paper - and so not only Abbott, but also Ed Balls and Andy Burnham, visibly had to rely on nominations given just to avoid a blatant show of stitch-up - is undemocratic. There should be a democratic method for regular Labour Party leadership elections, controlled by the members of local Labour Parties and the affiliated unions, with no special power for or veto by the MPs.

If we had a democratic system, we would have a better choice now, with John McDonnell's name on the ballot paper.

As it is now, Diane Abbott is the left candidate, however sharply critical we are of her record. Over the last 20-odd years she has generally voted and spoken against the Iraq invasion, privatisation, and cuts, and for trade union rights, migrant rights, expanded council housing, scrapping Trident, free higher education, and civil liberties.

The other candidates have been Cabinet ministers and backroom boys for Blair and Brown. They now say they want to "move on" from New Labour, but with almost no specifics except the foul talk by Burnham and Balls on immigration.

Socialists should support Abbott as part of our concern to organise the left in the labour movement as a whole, and with the understanding that the bigger the vote for Abbott, the better the conditions for organising to do that.

The wretched case of Diane Abbott's decision to send

her son to private school sums up why we must be critical. Abbott had been sharply and publicly critical of Harriet Harman for sending her son to a selective state school in 1996.

When Abbott's son started at private school in 2003, she responded to criticism by saying that her decision was "indefensible" but she would rather do what benefited her son than be politically consistent. Now she demagogically defends the decision by saying that it came out of the devotion which West Indian (only West Indian?) mothers have to their children, and criticism is idle talk by "white middle-class men".

That sort of inconsistency is why Abbott's background includes not only her left-wing votes in Parliament, but also a poor record on actively supporting workers' struggles, on using her position as MP to promote rank-and-file campaigns in the labour movement, and on the misdeed of Labour councils in her own patch in Hackney.

In her first political statement for the leadership contest, in Tribune, Abbott put "reviving internal party democracy" at the top of her political prospectus.

Excellent! Unless and until we win the right for a democratic Labour Party conference to have effective control of Labour policy and what the leadership does, even the best left-wing promises from aspirant Labour leaders are only promises, likely to fade away under pressure as Diane Abbott's opposition to private schooling did.

At Labour Party conference 2009, the Labour leadership was pushed into promising a comprehensive review of the whole undemocratic structure which Tony Blair, at the peak of his prestige, steamrollered the party into in 1997.

The first question for every leadership candidate should be: will they see this review carried through loyally? Will they provide for a free democratic vote on each structural issue, or try to ram through a "like-it-or-lump-it" package? Will they personally support control over policy by a democratic conference?

Even if Abbott will not be clear on this, socialists should use her candidacy to raise the issue and build support.

Unions which have committed themselves to back only Labour-leader candidates who support the broad lines of union policy on cuts, privatisation, Trident, and anti-union laws can be true to that commitment only by recommending Diane Abbott. As a basic measure of union democracy, socialists should campaign for unions to make that recommendation.

The Socialist Campaign to Stop the Tories and Fascists was set up to provide a socialist voice in the "vote Labour" camp at the May 2010 general election. Sponsors (in personal capacity) include: John McDonnell, Labour MP for Hayes and Harlington and Labour Representation Committee Chair; Susan Press, LRC Vice-Chair; Maria Exall, LRC Vice-Chair and CWU National Executive; Paul Holmes, secretary of Kirklees Unison and United Left candidate for Unison general secretary; Andy Dowland, South West Regional Rep, UNISON Labour Link, and Yeovil CLP; Pete Firmin, LRC Joint Secretary; David Drew, former Labour MP for Stroud.
