
Socialist Campaign to Stop The Tories

Labour needs living conferences!

Since 1997, Labour Party conference has become more like a rally and photo-opportunity than a conference.

Labour conference used to be "the parliament of the labour movement". There were many shortcomings, and many problems about getting the Party leadership to stick to policies decided by conference, but there was real debate, and there were real decisions.

Since 1997 debate has been squeezed to a minimum. Where decisions with any bite have been taken, the Party leadership has considered it so obvious that it will disregard them as not even to need saying.

The low point was reached with the 2007 conference, which voted to ban political motions to conference from unions or CLPs.

It has been promised – and by now it seems impossible that the promise will be evaded – that this 2010 conference will see a return to taking and debating motions.

But for conference to have real life, much more will be done. And until and unless the Party has a conference with real life and real decision-making power, all talk of improving Party democracy is empty.

The following measures have all built up sizeable support in unions and CLPs, and are essential:

- Conference to be able to amend, and vote in parts on, National Policy Forum documents.
- A wider range of motions to conference, and without the restriction that they be "contemporary" (meaning, in effect, relating to events in August), a restriction which can enable CAC, if so minded, to rule out almost any motion.
- A genuine review of Party structures. Full debate on proposed rule changes, without attempts to rule them out of order on the spurious grounds that some other rule change affecting the same broad chapter of the rule book has been debated within the last three years.

The leader is there to serve the party, not the party to serve the leader

Conference will of course want to welcome the new leader announced on 25 September. But we must remember the democratic principle that leaders are there to serve parties, not parties to serve leaders.

In 1994 Tony Blair had a landslide majority in all three sections of the electoral college. With the Tory government already "walking wounded", Blair gained immense political "capital" as the Labour leader who would (and did) end 18 years of Tory rule.

In hindsight it was foolish for the Party to give Blair the virtual free hand that he gained. It was foolish to think that issues of policy, principle, and Party democracy could be set aside on the basis that defeating the Tories was all that really mattered.

The result was that we got a "Labour" government that was pretty much "Tory" in many of its attitudes and policies. We are still living with the deep political demoralisation in the working class, and the deep decay of Labour Party organisation and activism, that resulted.

Never again! All the leadership candidates have promised more Party democracy. Let them start by supporting moves to restore real life to Party conference, and pledging to abide by democratic conference decisions.

Defend the union-Labour link! Reject state funding of political parties

On 9 September deputy prime minister Nick Clegg promised "new rules on spending and donations" for political parties, tied with "greater state funding".

The Government will probably try to ban collective trade-union funding of the Labour Party, as proposed by the Hayden Phillips report in 2007.

The Tories and the Lib-Dems will always have more rich backers, and always have ways to split up those rich backers' donations into smaller lumps if necessary. They will also have more donations from the well-off middle class.

Trade unions and socialists founded the Labour Party so that collective working-class action, pooling the individually-puny financial resources of millions of working-class people, could offset that advantage of wealth. The proposal is to make that collective working-class action illegal!

State funding is not a "fair" alternative. It is a proposal to turn politics even more into the affair of a separated-off "political class", living very comfortably above the heads of the majority of the population on the basis of voting themselves money.

David Miliband has made a welcome statement. "Working people organised in trade unions bring special character, tradition, and insight to our party. That relationship will not be negotiated away, and we will not have our internal party structures decided by Tories".

Worryingly, however, Ed Miliband – the candidate whom, for some good reasons, the big unions have backed and most Labour left-wingers have voted for as no.2 after Diane Abbott – told "Left Foot Forward" that he wants "wider reforms to our political process, including to party funding". The *Financial Times* (24 September) quoted "a source in Ed Miliband's campaign" as saying that he "promises to work with the other parties to make progress on party funding".

Make Labour councils fight the cuts!

Conference will probably be unanimous about fighting the Tory cuts, and rightly so.

But how can Labour fight cuts effectively and credibly if Labour's representatives in many local authorities are making those very same cuts?

It will not be a matter of painless trimming at the edges. The money transferred from central government to local councils is likely to be cut about 25%. Twenty-five per cent cuts by councils will trash services and jobs, and deeply antagonise millions of people, just as much as 25% cuts in central government programmes will.

There is an alternative. Labour councils can work with unions and communities to force the Government to repeal social cuts, and instead to cut areas like arms spending.

Some Labour councils talked a lot about doing that in the 1980s, but did not follow through to the end. The answer is to follow it through to the end.

It is not true that councils must cut immediately or collapse. Local authorities are large bodies with financial flexibility. They have assets they can sell, for example. They have ways of winning time.

If they do that, they can set themselves at the head of great rebellions against the Lib/ Tory government's devastating cuts, instead of becoming local agents of those cuts.

Trash capitalism, not services, jobs, and benefits!

The labour movement should fight the cuts unequivocally, and back policies to deal with the crisis at the expense of capitalism, not of the working class.

- Sack the bank bosses — for a single, publicly-owned, democratically-controlled banking, pensions, and mortgage service.

- Tax the rich and business to expand public services. Open the bosses' books; nationalise companies which axe jobs, under workers' control.

- Decent jobs for all. Cut work hours with no loss of pay.

- A crash programme of council house building and repairs.

- Scrap the Tory anti-union laws. For legal rights to organise, to strike, to take solidarity action, and to picket. Full equal rights for part-time, temporary and agency workers.

- Stop and reverse cuts and privatisations.

Restore the NHS. Nationalise the drug industry. No to Academies, a good local secular comprehensive school for every child. Free education from nursery to university. Living student grants.

- Cut arms spending; scrap the Trident replacement. On the evidence, sending troops to Afghanistan does more harm than good; they should be withdrawn.

To carry through such policies we need a government very different from New Labour. a workers' government, a government based on a renewed and reorganised labour movement, a government that serves the working class as the Tories — and Blair and Brown in their time — have served the bosses and the rich.

- For working-class representation in politics. New Labour seriously disenfranchised the working class, blocking the political channels which might have enabled working-class organisations to enforce policies.

- Reconstruct and fight for Labour Party democracy and the trade-union voice in the Labour Party.

- Support for workers and working-class communities fighting back.

Socialist Campaign to Stop the Tories

The Socialist Campaign to Stop the Tories and Fascists was established in the run-up to the May 2010 general election to provide a socialist, anti-New-Labour voice within the Labour campaign to stop the Tories.

Sponsors include: John McDonnell, Labour MP for Hayes and Harlington and Labour Representation Committee Chair; Susan Press, LRC Vice-Chair and Hebden Bridge town councillor; 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 and political officer of CWU London West End Amal branch; and many more.

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24 September 2010

Don't miss these meetings

Saturday September 25. Convention of the Left: "building unity to stop the cuts". 10:00-17:00, Friends House, Mount St.

Grass Roots Umbrella Network briefing for Labour Party conference delegates. 17:00, Bar 38, Great Northern Warehouse, Peter Street, Manchester M2 5GP

Sunday September 26. CLPD briefing for Labour Party conference delegates. 10:30, Bar 38, Great Northern Warehouse, Peter Street, Manchester M2 5GP

LRC fringe meeting. 19:00, Friends House, Mount St.

Monday September 27: Socialist Campaign Group fringe meeting. 19:30, Mechanics Institute, 103 Princess Street, Manchester M1 6DD

Wednesday September 29: CLPD Labour Party conference assessment meeting. 18:00, Bar 38, Great Northern Warehouse, Peter Street, Manchester M2 5GP