

Election for UNISON General Secretary Should socialists back Bickerstaffe?

No, says Declan Tudor

UNISON, Britain's biggest union, will be voting in October for a replacement for its retiring General Secretary, Alan Jinkinson. There are four candidates — Rodney Bickerstaffe, Militant Labour's Roger Banister, who is standing on the Campaign for a Fighting Democratic UNISON (CDFU) platform, the SWP's Yunus Bakhsh and Peter Hunter, a Catholic anti-abortionist. The result is not in doubt. Rodney Bickerstaffe will walk it.

How should socialists vote? If there had been a Blairite candidate running against Bickerstaffe, fulfilling the same role as Jack Dromey did when Bill Morris was seeking re-election in the TGWU earlier this year, then it would be easy and clear cut — Rodney Bickerstaffe would have to receive the support of all serious socialists in the union. Rodney Bickerstaffe, along with Bill Morris, opposes (some of) the sweeping changes Blair is making and planning in the Labour Party.

There is no such challenge. Shall we, nonetheless, support him? I say no.

Rodney Bickerstaffe has been an Associate General Secretary since UNISON was established. He is as responsible as anyone for the unacceptable role that the leadership has played on all the key issues.

Bickerstaffe represents some of the worse characteristics of the UNISON leadership — for example centralising power in the hands of unelected full timers, and undermining the power of branches.

Despite this, supporters of Workers' Liberty have been at the forefront of arguing that, in the absence of any credible, non-aligned left candidate, it would be a mistake to stand a candidate against Rodney Bickerstaffe:

- It could only divert attention from the essential battles within the union over cuts and pay.

- Many ex-NUPE members will not understand why the predominately ex-NALGO left is standing against him.

We argued that branches should not nominate either the SWP or the Militant Labour candidate; or Bickerstaffe.

Yunus Bakhsh, a Newcastle health branch secretary, is standing only as an SWP member. The SWP are not even pretending that his candidature is part of any broader project in the union — it is purely a party-building exercise. The several hundred SWP members in the union will no doubt ensure that he receive a vote that is not completely derisory.

Yunus Bakhsh may receive more votes than NEC member Roger Banister, the



Rodney Bickerstaffe

Militant candidate will receive. Militant Labour is a declining and relatively weak force in the union. But the CDFU, although it is not a massive force, is by far the biggest broad left type grouping in the union and carries weight with many activists. Because of the weakness of Militant they have fought for him to be a candidate of the CFDU — a depleted Militant is forced to speak to and try to work with the rest of the left.

The CFDU was seriously split over the decision to stand Roger Banister, and it has left a very bitter taste in the mouths of many supporters of the CFDU. Yet CFDU remains the main left grouping within UNISON. A very positive development is the formation of a UNISON Labour Party left group which is to have its first meeting at the UNISON Health Conference in late September.

A UNISON Labour left will be a step in the right direction. The existing left, in the form of the CFDU, so far has failed to reach beyond the ex-NALGO left. However we should not turn our backs on the existing left in the belief that a new, better, broader left already exists.

This election is not just about Rodney Bickerstaffe. It will also be a contest on the left between the SWP and the CFDU. For all his, many, faults, Roger Banister is the candidate of the only group in the union resembling a broad left. Roger Banister getting a respectable vote against a smaller vote of the SWP would be a good thing for the left. The left has made a serious mistake by contesting this election but even so I believe that socialists should say "vote for Roger Banister".

Yes, says Will Rogers

A VOTE for Roger Bannister in the elections would be disastrous. Socialists should say "vote for Bickerstaffe, but fight for socialist policies."

Those who would recoil from voting Bickerstaffe are mainly people from the weak, divided, and confused left, mostly coming from ex-NALGO, and people already in or close to "revolutionary" groups of one sort or another.

What we should be looking at is the potentially much wider group of left leaning people from ex-NUPE who are mainly Labour Party members or supporters. We should also offer a broad labour movement perspective to other trade union activists from ex-NALGO who are fed up with the way UNISON is going. They want to see a more campaigning and active UNISON. They are ready and willing to fight on issues like compulsory competitive tendering, cuts and redundancies, the Welfare State and the health service, terms and conditions on the job, pay.

Many of these will support Bickerstaffe because they see him willing to stand up against Blair on issues like the minimum wage, and public ownership of the utilities. They won't support Banister because they know he represents only Militant, an organisation which stands candidates against Labour in elections, and has increasingly less relevance to the movement as a whole.

They won't support the SWP because of the SWP's hostile and parasitic attitude to the Labour Party.

At the same time, these people will be unhappy that the merger appears to be a mess, that UNISON has failed to organise against cuts in the health service, on pay and conditions of service, on CCT, on market testing.

Socialists can influence them by saying: "vote Bickerstaffe but fight for democracy in the union and for socialist politics." This way we can hope to build a genuine broad-based left, capable of putting up a better fight at next year's conference.

The danger is that many people "on the left" who are against the idea of a Blair-dominated Labour Party and in favour of a more active union, will be repelled by the sectarians, Militant and SWP alike, and so back a "stop the trots" offensive by the NEC and some of their supporters.