

Some thoughts on the bulletin “No to Labour Affiliation at SGM” (NTLAAS) produced by the Campaign to Defend RMT’s Political Strategy (CTDRPS) from an RMT member who thinks we should reaffiliate to the LP

The NTLAAS bulletin refers to “A document ... now being circulated, in the name of the Labour Party, that seeks to make the case for affiliation.” This document has been sent to all branches and its title is “RMT LABOUR PARTY AFFILIATION DISCUSSION PAPER”.

The proposals in the LP discussion paper don’t interfere with any part of our current political strategy except we’d no longer be able to support standing candidates against Labour in elections.

The LP’s response should be read as their first submission in an on-going negotiation between RMT and the LP. We will have our own internal discussion and as things come out in that discussion the union’s executive should pass the results on to the LP so that both parties can come to an arrangement that is acceptable to both sides.

Responses to the answers given to the 6 numbered questions in the bulletin.

1. Labour’s position on TfL now is not the same as the Blairite LP. NTLAAS’s selective quote from the LP document conveniently omits the next sentence which says: “It is however London Labour Party Policy that the subsidy should be reinstated when Labour is elected into government and this is supported by the Mayor and Labour. The London Labour Party also passed a motion to support campaigning against the London Underground cuts.” This isn’t defeatist, it is stating what is, how it will be reversed in the future and what we should do to fight it now.

Under Corbyn’s leadership Labour and the vast majority of its membership are anti-austerity: opposed to them in the party is a majority of MPs and councillors. At the moment the fight is fairly evenly matched; yes, there have been victories for our side, winning 3 out of 3 NEC seats in the recent election, the resignation of Iain McNichol and the abandoning of the HDV but the bulk of our elected representatives have failed to fight the cuts and come out against DOO. Labour’s 2017 GE manifesto however did include the following commitment: “...ending the expansion of driver only operations, ...”

2. NTLAAS raises an important point about the level of our affiliation fees. As previously noted there is a pronounced left right split within the LP. It makes sense then for us to say, that as a union seeking LP affiliation with the explicit aim of weighing in on the side of Corbyn and the left, we should do so on a reduced funding basis. This would leave us with money to pursue our own political objectives that aren’t already Labour objectives whilst recognising that as Labour aligned itself more with us we could increase our affiliation payments. This same sliding scale consideration could also be applied by branches who want to affiliate to their local CLP.

Yes, this will mean that the likes of Chuka Umunna and Owen Smith get some of our money but sometimes you have to make sacrifices to achieve something bigger: like when TUSC decided not to contest any seats at the last GE, including Umunna’s and Smith’s because, as they rightly said “... this general election is different, giving working class people the opportunity to drive out the Tory

government and, on this occasion, put a socialist in Number Ten. That's the job that we will concentrate on for the next four weeks." What those of us who want reaffiliation are saying is that paying an as yet undecided sum in affiliation fees and giving up the ability to stand candidates against Labour, and not just for 4 weeks, is a price worth paying to further help Corbyn and the left defeat the right of the LP and will give us the best chance of delivering the union's political objectives. And on a lighter note, it would be great to see the look of despair on Umunna's and Smith's face if we did decide to affiliate.

The level of affiliation fees is also tied up with the level of influence we want and what arrangements we make with the LP concerning the Scottish and Irish membership. The next 2 points deal with that.

3. There is a big difference between an individual LP member who happens to be an RMT member attending a LP meeting and a LP member who is attending that same meeting as a delegate from their RMT branch, which the union should encourage if we do affiliate. Therefore "Most of the so called new powers we'd get..." [from affiliating] are actual new powers. Unlike the individual, the delegate is there to represent the union, not themselves. With some effort from RMT HO, in line with union policy, affiliation to Labour will give all RMT branches a nationwide (however that is defined, see below) structure through which we can join other workers and socialists in the political fight to have our policies implemented. This will definitely increase our influence in the LP rather than relying, as we do presently, on the political choices of RMT LP members who attend LP meetings as individuals and not as mandated RMT delegates.

When it comes to LP NEC positions and motions you're going to have to take your chances. We'd have somewhere between 1 and 80,000 of them (depending on how many members we chose to affiliate) in a party with an affiliated union membership of 3 million and an individual membership of half a million. However, when it came to motions at conference your chances would be increased because of the ability of individual LP RMT delegates to send RMT sponsored motions to conference through their CLPs.

This may be a bit of a come down for those union supporters of a small political party with no trade union affiliates who are used to definite representation on the party's ruling body and a definite ability to get their motions on the agenda of its conference. We'd have to give up our position as a big fish in a small pond in a bid to have more influence in a party that could form the next government and which has many "pro-RMT policies".

We do have influence "... affiliated or not ..." but if you define influence as the ability to make things happen it is obvious that we will have more in the LP if we affiliate.

4. It is not as clear cut as NTLAAS make out. The LP document says that: "RMT affiliation would be to the Labour Party at UK level. RMT can choose to affiliate to the Labour Party without specifically affiliating to the Scottish Labour Party, or providing it financial support." It isn't clear what this means but it does provide wriggle room and if we remember to regard our current consultation as part of a conversation with the Labour Party as outlined above we could argue for the following workaround.

To prevent differences over Scottish politics becoming a roadblock to Labour reaffiliation: when the Fire Brigades Union reaffiliated to Labour after Jeremy Corbyn became leader, it affiliated only its

members in England and Wales. RMT could do something similar, allowing Scottish branches to maintain some political autonomy.

5. "We would not be allowed to support any non-labour candidates anywhere in the UK." (NTLAAS)

Only true for elections. As the LP's document states: "Whilst as a political party Labour would understandably prefer otherwise, affiliation would not technically prevent RMT from supporting the general campaigning and policy work of Caroline Lucas or other politicians who support RMT's aims and members. Affiliation to the Labour Party would also not prevent RMT campaigning together and working alongside MPs of other parties on key policies and shared issues of concern, as long as RMT does not campaign against the Labour Party in elections." With regard to the RMT's cross party groups the document states: "These can continue. There is nothing to prevent the union maintaining its cross-party groups if it chooses to do so." And further: "RMT could work jointly with TUSC on important priorities such as anti-austerity campaigning. RMT can also continue its relationship with other solidarity and campaigning groups which RMT supports. Labour is opposed to austerity. RMT will not be put under any pressure to moderate its position and will be free to campaign against any cuts at local level, even in Labour-held councils, as well as campaigning against cuts at national level."

6. We couldn't stand against the likes of Birmingham's LP councillors but as point 5 makes clear we could do something that is probably just as effective by co-ordinating our LP RMT delegates to go into their CLPs and get those bodies to launch campaigns or join those already existing against the austerity that Labour councillors are imposing and replace them with anti-austerity LP candidates. And in a related point RMT affiliated branches could also use the trigger ballot mechanism against any Labour MP they were unhappy with.

A method for minimising the money "... going to assist candidates who do not support key RMT policies ..." has already been outlined.

Comment on the remaining content that starts with the box entitled "We were told that RMT ... "

"We should make any consideration of affiliation dependent on a real fight to stop Labour councillors making austerity cuts, to de-select pro austerity, pro-war Labour MPs and for Labour to ACT not just talk in the fight against DOO."

How conservative and passive! The author of the bulletin seems to be saying that a "real" fight inside Labour would be a good thing but we should wait until somebody else gets it going for us before you'll consider getting fully involved? The problem with this wait and see approach is that the opening round of that fight has already started, its been going on for 2 years. The pro-affiliation side want to move it on to the level suggested in the bulletin by adopting the affiliation tactic but CTDRPS supporters won't help because you think we must maintain the right to stand candidates against Labour.

So the next question has to be: what has that right to stand candidates against Labour achieved in the last 8 years, especially in England and Wales? Answer, not very much, and certainly not enough to now justify your position of not affiliating to Labour.

Further on the bulletin states: “We should make sure we are in a position to effectively support Corbyn again should he face another leadership battle.” If it is important to keep Corbyn in post it is surely better to provide all the support to him that we can now to bolster his position before it gets to the point of a leadership challenge?

Most of the points in the remaining text have already been dealt and are covered in summary by repeating that the only change we’ll need to make to our political strategy is to not stand candidates against Labour. But to deal with the bullet points:

1. It has got to be debatable whether we did “... secure more victories and exert influence in a way no other trade union can” but it is almost certain that our current political strategy has played no part in our growth. Has anybody ever convinced somebody to join the union by explaining our political strategy to them?

2. Affiliating to Labour would not stop the RMT being “... free to determine our policies and pursue an agenda which delivers for our members.” Members should read the LP document to see how unrestrictive it is but for some who have already read it seems we still need to labour the point:

The only change that affiliating to Labour would make to our political strategy is that we couldn’t support candidates standing against Labour in elections.