



Workers' Liberty Unite members' bulletin

General secretary election: why we're saying vote Len McCluskey

Unite branches and workplace reps committees are currently holding meetings to decide who to nominate for the position of General Secretary. Nominations have to be made by early September, and the election itself will take place in late October and early November.

Unite is Britain's biggest union, even if its claimed membership of two million is inflated. The result of the election will therefore impact not just on Unite itself, but also on the broader trade union movement and – given that Unite is Labour's biggest union affiliate – on the Labour Party as well.

Workers' Liberty members in Unite are advocating a critical vote for Len McCluskey - combined with a fight to build a genuine rank-and-file movement and transform Unite into a democratic, fighting union.

1 ■ The right-wing candidate is **Les Bayliss**. Backed by the Workers Uniting group (falsely describing itself as the “broad-based left-progressive organisation within Unite”), he represents a continuation of the old-style machine-politics and bureaucratic dictatorship which prevailed in Amicus.

Bayliss's saving grace is that he does not mince his words. According to his election material, he will put an end to “adventurism and infantile and phoney militancy that alienates our members and the general public.” He will have no truck with “bravado and mock militancy, cheap publicity stunts and ‘back of a fag packet’ bargaining strategies.”

Getting rid of mock militancy – if it actually exists – would be a good thing. But Bayliss is certainly the last candidate wanting to replace it by real militancy.

Sounding rather like David Cameron, Bayliss promises a purge of bureaucratic overstaffing and inefficiency.

He will “eradicate from our administration expensive and outmoded methods of working and unnecessary duplication of processes.” He will “end the duplication of services in every region, the wasting of resources, the wasting of expertise, and the weakening of the union through fragmentation.”

Bayliss's attack on duplication and fragmentation is code for: centralisation under the supreme control of the General Secretary.

Bayliss has also spoken about concentrating the unions' efforts on skilled workers with industrial muscle – implying hostility to organising among young, precarious, migrant and other at present largely unorganised workers.

2 ■ A second right-wing candidate (if she secures enough nominations) is **Gail Cartmail**, who describes herself as the “independent progressive candidate”. She stresses that she is not backed by any of the factions in Unite and can therefore unite the union's membership:

“What our union doesn't need is more infighting between the same political factions that have failed to bring the different sectors of Unite together. Sectarianism and division is not in our members' interests, and a win for one of the factions will lead to more exclusion and a widening of rifts.”

But Cartmail does not mince her words either: “You look at some of those people [i.e. the other candidates and their supporters] and it's like a scene from *Reservoir Dogs*.” They are “the same old, same old.” The other candidates, she says, are representative of a “white, male, pale and stale” culture.

Cartmail wants to usher in a new culture in which talent can flourish and progress to dizzying heights: “Unite needs to develop a cadre of diverse activists who can be groomed to take leadership positions, not just within the union, but as councillors and parliamentary candidates too.”

In other words, Unite should become a more efficient transmission belt for labour movement careerists: all full-timers would be “well-trained to meet members' needs,” they would “receive suitable management training,” and they would “know that they are valued in terms of the pay that they earn” – as if union officials are currently underpaid!

With candidates like Cartmail and, even more so, Bayliss looking to take the General Secretary's post, this is not an election which the left in Unite can afford to sit out on the grounds that neither of the left candidates can be said to inspire a great deal of confidence.

3 ■ The main “left” candidate for General Secretary is **Len McCluskey**. Despite our criticisms of his record as Unite Assistant General Secretary, and despite the limitations of his election manifesto, the AWL is calling for a vote for McCluskey.

McCluskey pledges to make Unite a democratic union (with members having the decisive say in how it conducts itself), a fighting union (which stands up for its members), an organising union (which reaches out to the unorganised), and a tolerant and inclusive union (in which bullying and political witchhunts no longer have a role to play).

In response to what he has rightly called “the class war which has been declared against the trade unions by the new government and employers,” McCluskey has declared that “now is not the time to batten down the hatches but to rise like lions!” It is “only organised labour which can defend jobs,” despite the threat of yet further anti-union laws:

“In the depths of a capitalist crisis, working people are to be denied any prospect of resisting. The trade union movement will not see these threats off simply by lobbying, necessary though that is.”

“We have to be prepared to demonstrate, protest and take industrial action where necessary to make it clear that we are not going to be the scapegoats for the bankers’ crisis, and to say that defending union rights is the same thing as defending working people’s living standards.”

In campaign meetings McCluskey has also repeatedly spoken of the need to win back the Labour Party from the Blairites and Brownites: Unite members should join the party as individuals, and also secure delegations to local Constituency Labour Parties from their Unite branches.

McCluskey says (some of) the right things about the need to take on the Tory/Lib-Dem coalition’s offensive against the working class, the centrality of the trade union movement to the fightback against that offensive, the use of industrial action where necessary (as it will be), and the need to challenge Blairite-Brownite control of the Labour Party.

But there is a problem. And that problem is the gap between what McCluskey says and what he actually does.

McCluskey wants a democratic union? But that must involve the election of union officials (with officials being paid around what the members whom they represent are paid), and the right of Unite branches to communicate with one another. Yet there is no mention of electing, rather than appointing, union officials, of reducing their pay, or of the right to inter-branch communication, in McCluskey’s campaigning material.

McCluskey wants a fighting union which stands up for its members? But time and time again Unite has failed to back up its members who find themselves under attack from their employers, and has allowed itself to be intimidated by the Tories’ anti-union laws. Gate Gourmet is an obvious case. McCluskey has been party to those failures. Reading McCluskey’s campaigning material right now, you would not even be aware of the BA dispute!

McCluskey wants an organising union which reaches out to the unorganised? But when Vestas workers on the Isle of Wight, some of whom were already Unite members, occupied their workplace last year in a fight to save jobs, Unite took a conscious decision not to recruit the rest of the workforce, leaving them to be recruited by the RMT. In fact the union refused to even send representatives to the occupation.

McCluskey wants to seize back the Labour Party from the Brownites and Blairites? But in the last Labour Party leadership contest and also in the current one, McCluskey refused to support the candidate (John McDonnell) who represented the only serious challenge to the Labour right - and in 2007 went along with Tony Woodley nominating Brown. Reading McCluskey’s campaigning material, you would not even know that a Labour Party leadership contest was currently underway! He also went along with the vote by Unite’s delegation at the 2007 Labour Party conference to back the abolition of motions from unions and CLPs - so much for taking control!

Calling for a vote for McCluskey does not mean relying on him to deliver what he says he stands for. McCluskey has not done it so far, in his capacity as Assistant General Secretary. And there is no reason to suppose that he would deliver in the role of General Secretary.

Campaigning for a vote for McCluskey needs to be linked to discussion about what needs to be done to turn the generalities contained in his election manifesto into reality. The election campaign needs to be part of a much broader campaign amongst the union’s rank-and-file members aimed at transforming Unite – in deeds, not just in words – into a fighting union.

That discussion and that campaigning also needs to be taken up in the **United Left**, the main force in Unite behind McCluskey in the election. The United Left varies from region to region. Overall, though, it tends towards being an old-style Broad Left which focuses disproportionately (though not exclusively) on union-internal elections.

4 ■ The other Unite member to put his name forward for nomination is **Jerry Hicks**. Much, but not all, of the criticism of Hicks from others on the left in Unite is wide of the mark. The case for voting for Hicks is not a stupid one by any means.

Until being victimised and sacked for his trade union activities, Hicks was a convenor in the Rolls Royce Bristol plant. He commanded sufficient respect amongst his members that they took unofficial strike action against his dismissal. After failing to win re-instatement – with the Amicus apparatus doing nothing to help him – Hicks turned down a job with Amicus on the grounds that all officials should be elected.

Individual elements in Hicks’ election platform place him well to the left of McCluskey. He advocates, for example, the election of all union full-timers, re-nationalisation of the privatised industries, and defiance of the anti-union laws. His election material also raises question which McCluskey sidesteps.

But the positive aspects of Hicks as an individual and of some of his election policies are outweighed by a number of negatives.

Hicks condemns the Tory anti-union laws which saw Unite being dragged into the High Court because of alleged balloting technicalities. But the same anti-union laws created the post of Trade Union Certification

Officer. And it was Hicks who dragged Amicus in front of the Certification Officer in 2009 in order to trigger an election for the post of Amicus General Secretary.

Hicks wants to return ownership of the union to where it belongs: its members. At the same time he makes great play of opposing the removal of retired members from branch officer positions: "retired members should have full and equal rights in the union's structures."

This is not a quirk but opportunism. A disproportionate large number of votes cast in Unite elections are cast by retired members.

Hicks also plays to (a section of) the gallery with his (legitimate) attacks on the money which Unite hands over to the Labour Party without getting anything in return. Hicks calls for a "fundamental change" in Unite's "relationship with the Labour Party", but does not spell out what that change is. In fact, Hicks backs continued affiliation to the Labour Party. But you would not know it from his election material.

Hicks says that, if elected, he will take only a workers' wage. But his commitment to elected representatives taking only a workers' wage seems somewhat selective. In "Respect" he happily cohabits with George Galloway, who boasts of not being able to survive on three workers wages. And although he backs the election of all Unite full-timers, he does not advocate a workers' wage for any other Unite officials.

Hicks shows no sign of launching any kind of new rank-and-file group in Unite which could campaign on an ongoing basis for the kind of policies which he advocates. But he has also cut himself off from the United Left: it was his theatricals at the meeting held earlier this year to select the United Left candidate for the General Secretary's election which resulted in a perception of him as a maverick who does not deserve to be taken seriously.

Hicks' decision to stand (assuming that he secures the required number of nominations) also raises the question of a split in the left vote - given the fact that our union's primitive electoral system does not allow for transferable votes/ranking candidates in order of preference. Is McCluskey so bad (by left standards) and Hicks so good (by the same standards) that the risk of Bayliss winning the election, and all that that entails, by 'coming up through the middle' is not a relevant consideration?

The answer to the question is: McCluskey is not so bad nor Hicks so good that the risk of a split in the left vote which paves the way for a Bayliss victory can be ignored. This consideration might not be decisive. But it is certainly a factor to take into consideration.

Activists in Unite need to organise for more than just a cross in a box against McCluskey's name. Unite activists – and that includes Hicks and his supporters – need to use the election campaign as a springboard to push through the radical changes which are needed to transform Unite into a genuinely rank-and-file controlled organisation.

The Tory/Lib-Dems declaration of class war lends an added urgency to the task of transforming Unite. The biggest union in Britain needs to be fit-for-purpose if it is to take on the coalition government and win. And it needs to be fit-for-purpose if it is to fight for a Labour government accountable to the working class.

Campaigning for a vote for McCluskey should not be an end in itself but a lever which opens up the prospect of making both the United Left and Unite itself fit-for-purpose.

For a democratic and fighting union!

Unite must organise to resist the ConDem coalition:

► **Oppose cuts and privatisation - tax the rich, cut military spending and scrap Trident**

► **No new anti-union laws; scrap the anti-union laws, for the right to strike**

► **For working-class political representation. For Labour Party conference to be able to make decisions binding on the Labour leadership.**

► **For the right of unions to finance political parties, and against state funding of parties.**

The new Tory/ Lib Dem coalition government is committed to cut brutally and deeply into the living standards of the working class - into our wages and into social spending.

The Tories as the leading party in government are now in a position to carry out their threats. There will be cuts as savage as the working class will let them get away with. Cuts as in Greece, if they can.

We already face a now-established judges' interpretation of the anti-union laws which means that employers like BA or Network Rail can halt almost any big strike by going to court and saying there has been this or that blemish in the ballot.

We may face new anti-union laws, giving the government power to ban any strike in public services and impose binding arbitration instead. (Such laws are Lib Dem policy, and Vince Cable repeated the message during the election campaign).

The big question of politics is now what the labour movement and the working class will do about it.

The unions face a challenge, both industrially and politically.

Now the labour movement is either going to roll over and take what the Tory/ Lib Dem coalition dishes out, or resist.

Much depends on what the union leaders do, and much also depends on what happens within the Labour Party in response to its defeat.

The Blair-Brown gang deliberately gutted the old Labour Party, changing its structures to block off all the channels which allowed working-class voices to be heard in it.

What is necessary, and what thinking labour movement people know is necessary, is fight to revive the Labour Party as, firstly, a real party with an active and power-wielding membership, and secondly, a working-class-based party.

The Labour leaders have already conceded a commitment to restore the right of unions and local Labour Parties to send motions to Labour Party conference. What is needed is a full-scale restoration of Labour Party structures and the old "open valve" between the unions and the Labour Party. The Labour leadership are now saying there will be no full scale review. We need to be demanding that it takes place.

We must build a broad political mobilisation on the big issues of the coming years by building a united-front coalition on a limited platform, along the lines of:

- Oppose cuts, tax the rich, cut military spending;
- Repeal the anti-union laws, establish a right to organise, to strike, and to picket;
- For working-class political representation. For Labour Party conference to be able to make political decisions binding on the Labour leadership.
- For the right of unions to finance political parties, and against state funding of political parties.

Support these demands and mandate the UNITE leadership to put motions on the agenda of Labour Party conference on these issues.

BA dispute – fight to win!

The government and state have shown in the BA dispute, and in a large number of RMT and NUJ cases, that they are prepared to increasingly use the courts to stop industrial action.

However the response of the Unite leadership has been embarrassing. Woodley has been desperate to try and call off the strike as quickly as possible and keeps pleading for negotiations. While such negotiations are important (and we don't support the self-promoting and embarrassing stunt pulled by the SWP) we should develop industrial strategies that can fight and win our very legitimate demands not desperately try and beg for minimal concessions.

We need to show the bosses and government that we will take strike action to win, we will support our members when they defy injunctions and that, as in the construction workers dispute, we see the important role

unofficial action can play. Industrial action is the only way to win our demands and Unite has the industrial strength to win such disputes. Begging and pleading shows weakness and will make the bosses attack even more.

Workers' Liberty is a revolutionary socialist organisation. Get in touch with our Unite comrades...



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