

The Marxist  
voice of the  
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movement

# SocialistAppeal

## Time to Reclaim Labour! The Trade Unions Hold the Key

**T**he debate over the union-Labour link has surfaced repeatedly during the trade union conference season. This is not surprising given the attacks from the Blair government.

Some small unions have even threatened to disaffiliate. Bectu is balloting its members. The RMT took the decision to support various parties opposed to Labour. There are also rumours that the FBU will cut its links.

*Socialist Appeal* has consistently opposed this line of argument. Whilst understanding the frustration with the Labour government, this would be a big mistake. The point is not simply to get angry, but to get even! The only way to defeat Blairism is for the unions to take back the party. This has become the overwhelming view of the bigger unions such as the CWU, UNISON, GMB, Amicus and the TGWU.

Over the past few years, in a string of union elections, the Blairite candidates have been resoundingly defeated. The biggest setback for Blair was the defeat of his erstwhile supporter Ken Jackson of the AEEU. The executive elections in September could see a further victory for the left. Again, the recent election of Kevin Curran in the GMB, a powerful industrial union, also served to reinforce this shift to the left in the trade unions.

Most recently has been the defeat of Blair supporter, John Kegee, deputy general secretary of the CWU, by left-winger Dave Ward. "The result is a further setback for Downing Street, which is losing its grip on the TUC and Labour Party machinery", states *The Guardian* newspaper. (23 May 2003)

At the conference of the Transport and General Workers' Union, Tony Woodley, the new general secretary, gave notice that New Labour's time was now up. "The days of New Labour are now numbered," he told the conference. He told delegates it was "time to reclaim our party" and put an end to privatisation, anti-union laws, pandering to big business and wars of aggression.

"Working people want something different. I say it is time to reclaim our party, not walk away from it as a few on the fringes would argue, but reclaim it for the values of working-class men and women, the values of socialism."

This call to arms is the latest onslaught in the long running battle over the future political direction of the government and the Labour party. Woodley is planning a summit of union leaders later this year to put the Labour "back in our party".

With Blair on the run, is it time for the trade unions to disaffiliate from the Labour Party? We say ABSOLUTELY

NOT! Such a move would simply play into Blair's hands. It is exactly what the Blairites want. They want to eliminate the trade union (i.e. working class) base of the party, so as to transform it into a capitalist party. Up until now, they have completely failed in this 'project', as they call it.

The task facing the trade unions, which created the Labour Party, must be to kick out the Blairites and take back the party for the working class. There has been a lot of talk, but now we have to transform words into deeds.

We support Woodley's initiative to call a summit of leaders to reclaim the party. To begin with, the 12 trade union representatives on Labour's NEC must represent union policy or be removed. Secondly, if the unions were to send 50 members into every constituency party, they could take it over. It would be sufficient to trigger the full reselection process of sitting MPs. Thirdly, the unions should give fully backing to a '300 Club', aimed at signing up 300 trade unionists to each Constituency Labour Party. Lastly, they should draw up a list of potential replacement candidates who will consistently fight for union policies.

The unions have the resources to help its members join the Labour Party. In the past trade unionists were given a special rate of £3 to

join. The unions should reinstate this scheme. The members' political levy should be used to subsidise members to join the Labour Party. This is not to cut the finances to the party, only that they will get this money through membership fees instead of donations, sponsorships, etc.

The FBU has just donated £12,000 to the Labour Party. This could have been used to help hundreds of FBU members join the party, a number of whom could have joined say, John Prescott's party in Hull East, or maybe Nick Raynsford's party in Greenwich and Woolwich. On the basis of the rules, which stipulate One Member One Vote, every potential Labour candidate would be judged by the policies they support. Obviously, the trade unionists would cast their vote for those closest associated with union policies. Together with other trade union members, they could decide, at the snap of their fingers, the best candidate to represent Hull East and Greenwich and Woolwich at the next election! Think about it.

The Labour Party could be easily reclaimed for the working class and socialist policies. The unions have the power to change the Labour Party. Now is the time to act. Don't contract out! Contract in!

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## Advance Notice: New book from Wellred!

# In the Cause of Labour A History of the British Trade Unions

By Rob Sewell

Approx 250 pages

Price: £9.99

Publication date: July 2003

We are pleased to announce the publication in July of a new book by Wellred on the history of British trade unionism. The original idea for this book arose from the series of monthly articles Rob Sewell wrote for the *Socialist Appeal* in the early 'nineties.

Although the material contained in this book is based on those articles, they have been considerably expanded, polished and revised. The conclusions are, nevertheless, the same as Rob Sewell wrote a decade ago. The only difference is that these conclusions have been confirmed by the events that have occurred since that time.

The book spans the two-hundred year history of the workers' movement, dealing with the birth of illegal trade unions, the Chartist movement, model unionism, New

Unionism, the rise of the Labour Party, the war years and their aftermath, the General Strike, and the period covering up until the present day.

The book is a Marxist history, which draws on the writings of Marxism to illuminate the lessons from the struggles of the working class in Britain.

It is particularly relevant today with the shift to the left of the trade unions and the emergence of a new generation of trade union activists.

A foreword for the book has been written by Jeremy Dear, general secretary of the NUJ and newly elected member of the General Council of the TUC.

All readers of *Socialist Appeal* are being given a chance to take up an introductory offer of receiving an advance copy of the book post-free.

To reserve your copy as soon as it comes off the press and to take advantage of our special offer please send a cheque for £9.99 to Wellred Publications PO Box 2626, London N1 7SQ