

Labour NEC retreats on Party democracy

By Sam Clemens

Unite member

The Labour Party National Executive Committee, taking the decisions it did at its meeting this week, is at risk of massively demoralising the Party grass roots. When the reports of the decisions of the marathon NEC meeting came out, social media was understandably awash with howls of anger and accusations of ‘betrayal’.

Last year, a number of Constituency Labour Parties were persuaded to remit their proposed rule changes with the ‘jam tomorrow’ promise of the Democracy Review. This was hoped to be Jeremy Corbyn’s attempt to make a start on the Herculean task of winding back the democratic counter-reforms’ started by Neil Kinnock and continued by Tony

Blair. These measures had stolen important elements of democracy from the members, emasculated the conference and managed to secure the hegemony of right-wing neo-liberal ideas at all levels in the Party for a generation.

Through the Democracy Review, Katy Clark, a former MP working out of the Leader’s Office, coordinated over 11,000 submissions from individuals, party organs and affiliates, and meetings, compiling the outcome into an 83-page document, which was broadly welcomed by a now vastly-expanded activist base.

Review proposed greater accountability

Review proposals had included measures to increase the accountability of local council Labour Groups, for example by making them accountable to local Labour Parties. However, such measures have been seen as a threat to a local ‘Labour aristocracy’ and in the end

the right-wing MPs and councillors’ representative on the NEC managed to persuade enough Trade Union representatives to water proposals down and kick a number of others down the road.

Some of these, however, are to be voted on finally at an NEC meeting scheduled for Saturday morning immediately before conference. If the right-wing changes are included in the final NEC statement, the only way they can be reversed is by voting down the whole NEC statement - something that is extremely unlikely to happen.

NEC Union reps ignore their own union policies

The three main points vital to returning the party back to the accountability of members are mandatory reselection of MPs, leadership ballot thresholds and the reform of local accountability of labour groups. On all three issues, significant concessions were made to the right-wing against the interests of the mass of the Party membership. In at least one case – on mandatory reselection, coming before conference as a rule change to allow ‘Open Selection’ proposed by Labour International – the representative of some unions have ignored the express policy and will of their members as determined by union conference decisions.

The proposal on reselection still leaves too much power in the hands of branch executives to undermine the vote, needing 30% of branches to vote in favour of reselection. This also opens the way for obstacles to reselection based on might be or might not be a branch quorum. There needs to be an automatic selection process at every election for every CLP. There should be no more candidates for life and no hurdles put in the way of selection processes.

The proposal on leadership ballot thresholds still requires any replacement for Corbyn to obtain the support of 10% of the Parliamentary Labour Party to get on the ballot paper, whereas, it would be far more democratic again, if Labour MPs had no veto

on CLP or trade union nominations. Finally, the proposals on democratic replacement of the unaccountable Local Campaign Forums are to be deferred until next year.

The support of union representatives on the NEC to delay proposals for local government democratisation is a significant betrayal of the numerous GMB, Unison and Unite members who have fought against cuts jobs, services and to the terms and conditions of some of our lowest paid workers, eg. in Birmingham where all three unions have had members affected in the nursery, homecare and bin workers’ disputes respectively. Grassroots members, who have fought against the gentrification of areas and the clearing of social housing to make way for private developers building a few euphemistically called ‘affordable housing’ units in replacement, will also be furious.

Clearly there are many more proposals in the 83-page document, some of which have been supported, but while control rests with the establishment, the anger of the membership will not be assuaged.

It can only be hoped that the NEC will be subject to sufficient pressure between now and Saturday to encourage more support for democracy in our party.

Left Horizons,

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