

Report of NEC Meeting 16th May 2007

This is not an official or comprehensive report, but picks out issues that may be of particular interest to members in Health.

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Merger

The General Secretary reported on aspects of the merger.

The new union had been registered with the Certification Officer on 27th April. Regions would be split 5-5 between Amicus and TGWU sections for the allocation of Regional Secretary duties. Previous TUC rules would have led to a reduction of seats on the General Council from 15 to 6 (the maximum allowed for any union). Brendan Barber had instituted a rule change that gave the new union 10 seats. This had been approved quite narrowly, with some unions opposing it. The new union will be called Unite – this had apparently been the only name on the shortlist to which there had not been strong objections.

Formal talks are taking place with the American/Canadian United Steel Workers Union, with a view to future merger.

Membership Allocation

A previous NEC meeting had discussed the need for cleansing of the membership database. The Yorkshire and Humberside Regional Secretary election had thrown up a lot of anomalies. It is known that members often change jobs or move house without informing the union. A large number of records had been amended automatically – for example, from the Post Office change of address database, and the correction of invalid postcodes.

A computer audit also showed that 80,000 members were in an 'inappropriate' branch. It was proposed that members without a workplace branch would be allocated to the nearest geographical branch to which they lived. In the future, the intention was that a member moving from one workplace to another, or from one region to another, would automatically be transferred to the new branch.

There was some discussion around this. Questions were asked about industrial sector

branches (of the sort that predominate in Health). The General Secretary said that these would be protected going forward. The process would be handled sympathetically. Several NEC members called for safeguards for individuals, and two called for safeguards to be written into the proposals, so that members with legitimate reasons for remaining in a particular branch would be able to do so. The General Secretary felt very strongly that this was unnecessary.

The proposals were approved, with two people voting against, and two abstaining.

Officer Duties

The General Secretary reported that a number of staff had been carrying out officer duties without having this job title. This was to fill gaps following voluntary redundancies. The union's financial position was now much stronger. The position would be regularised to give staff parity with their counterparts in the TGWU. Some senior officer duties would be reshuffled in the run up to full merger. Graham Goddard would take on responsibility for Finance, as Ed Sweeney was retiring.

Accounts and AR21

The annual accounts and the AR21 (the annual return to the Certification Officer) were put before the NEC for approval. Several NEC members asked questions – about pensions, the Amicus Trust company, and donations from the political fund. The annual accounts showed an apparent discrepancy between the grants and donations paid out of the political fund, and the donations to the Labour Party recorded by the Electoral Commission. The NEC endorsed the accounts, with 3 NEC members voting against endorsement.

Conference

The NEC agreed recommendations for Conference motions and composites, and agreed a voting system called 'Popularis'. A strong composite on health is supported by the NEC.

Discussions took place on a few items – for example, Trident replacement; motions on health from Food, Drink and Tobacco; nuclear power and pensions.

Political Report

A discussion took place on the question of the Labour Party leadership. The previous NEC had discussed the Labour leadership, and agreed the matter should be passed to the National Political Committee to make a recommendation.

Nominations for the leadership contest were due to close around 24 hours after the NEC debate took place. An NEC member proposed that the NEC should ask the Amicus Parliamentary group of MPs to nominate John McDonnell, so that a contest would take place for the Labour leadership. Members wanted a contest. This would not be in breach of the decision taken by the previous NEC. A second NEC member agreed, pointing out that by doing nothing, we would have a situation where John McDonnell wouldn't get enough votes to appear on the ballot paper, and there would be no debate. Another NEC member said, to laughter, that he supported John McDonnell but there was no point asking Labour MPs because they were 'arse lickers'. Another thought that this was a question for the National Political Committee, not the NEC. Deputy General Secretary Tony Dubbins felt it was naïve to think that we could ask MPs to nominate John McDonnell. We couldn't solve problems with a leadership contest, but had to get a Parliamentary Labour Party more reflective of our members. This could take decades, and there was no short-cut.

A small number of NEC members – perhaps four or five – voted in favour of asking the Amicus group of MPS to nominate John McDonnell. The proposal was heavily defeated.

Legal Matters

A recommendation was put to the NEC that legal support should never be provided to members to take action against the union. This applies particularly to employees of the union, who could take action against the union in its role as their employer. The rule book makes provision for such support to be given at the discretion of NEC members. A brief discussion took place on this, with a small number of NEC members taking the view that this could deter staff members from

joining the union, and that the discretion should remain. The General Secretary and the Head of Legal Services felt that discretion could open the issue of why we supported one person but not another. The recommendation to never give legal support to these members was overwhelmingly endorsed.

Industrial Education

The NEC considered a proposal to disband the Education Department, sub-contracting work to external providers in the future. An NEC member expressed disagreement, reporting complaints from members, and saying that there was inadequate information made available to the NEC and there was no need to take the decision just as we moved into the merger. The General Secretary said he had received no complaints, the strategy was well thought out and well presented, and the strategy needed to be endorsed. The NEC endorsed the strategy.

Construction

The NEC considered a report on the Construction Sector of the union. NEC members representing members in construction were supportive of the Construction Charter campaign, and felt that the lobby of Parliament on 28th March had been successful. A co-ordinated approach to campaigning had led to a sharp increase in recruitment.

Correspondence

The NEC noted correspondence from two London branches calling for a meeting of the London Regional Council to be convened. (The NEC meeting in March agreed that the Regional Council would be convened). A motion on support for John McDonnell was referred to the National Political Committee. A motion on support for the NPC campaign on pensions was noted. A letter from the Health Sector National Committee was noted. The letter stressed the strong desire of the Committee to see Health continue as an autonomous sector in the new union. The General Secretary felt that things were being invented and there was no threat to any sector. An NEC member asked colleagues on the Joint Executive and Rules Commission to note the strength of feeling on the issue, adding that reassurances on the future of Health as a stand-alone sector were welcome. A request for the Isle of Man to be established as a new area in the NW region was agreed.

Report of NEC Meeting 21st May 2007

This was a special meeting to consider the issue of Labour party leadership and deputy leadership. The meeting was not quorate, but took a decision in principle to be followed by a postal ballot of NEC members.

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By this stage, the only candidate for Labour Party leadership was Gordon Brown. John McDonnell had failed to receive enough nominations to appear on the ballot paper.

The recommendation from the National Political Committee was that Amicus should nominate Gordon Brown for leader, and Jon Cruddas for deputy leader.

Howard Turner reported on the debate at the National Political Committee. There had reportedly been an extensive debate. Howard said that, although a lot of people were unhappy with Brown, it would be a nonsense not to put forward a recommendation for Gordon Brown when he was the only candidate. John McDonnell had only been able to muster 29 votes. People had said they wanted a debate, but that would have needed two heavy weight candidates not a light weight like McDonnell. The only credible candidate was Gordon Brown.

Howard went on to say that he believed by supporting Jon Cruddas, we could try to square the circle and put a balanced slate first. Some NPC members had supported other candidates for deputy leader – 17 had supported Jon Cruddas, 5 supported Hilary Benn, and 3 had abstained.

General Secretary Derek Simpson endorsed the National Political Committee recommendations. Gordon Brown was the only person with enough nominations. If we didn't support him, it would put us as the largest affiliate to the Labour Party against the only person in the contest.

It was strange that people who supported John McDonnell didn't support Jon Cruddas. He had a very progressive agenda, very close to ours. We'd started on a journey, working with other unions. It was very important that before the last election we'd been able to develop the Warwick proposals – it was an indication that we were having some effect. There had been difficulties – it had been

difficult to get some parts implemented. But Warwick had made sure we held some very important seats. It was just possible that without Warwick, we wouldn't have had the last government elected. It was the work done by the 'Big 4'.

We'd put enormous effort into the Scottish and Welsh elections, and the local elections. It wasn't a changed government we wanted, but a changed Labour party. The old classic argument was that we have to appeal to the middle ground, but the core working class vote was leaving Labour. The middle class vote was loyal, but Labour was losing the core vote.

Of the six candidates for deputy leader, five were ministers, and had to bear a responsibility for fewer people voting and ½ million leaving the Labour Party. We needed clear water between where we'd been and where we were going. The person who represented clear water was Jon Cruddas. It was up to the NEC.

The debate was a relatively brief one. An NEC member was sorry John McDonnell was not on the ballot paper, and reminded Derek that he had been felt to have no chance in the General Secretary elections a few years before. There were concerns about Jon Cruddas. He had supported the war in Iraq, and supported the introduction of foundation hospitals – an important decision taken by the government to undermine the NHS.

Another NEC member said that there were two ways of looking at this. We could back a winner, or we could match the candidate to the views of the union. With Jon Cruddas, we were going down one particular route.

An NEC member argued that we should not support Gordon Brown. Brown was the architect of PFI, which was tearing the public sector apart. He had announced the sacking of 100,000 civil servants, and was farming their work out to the

private sector. He had intervened in a series of public sector pay awards to cap increases at 2% - a pay cut for every public sector worker. On the broader issues, he had supported war in Iraq, an assault on civil liberties, and union laws, and the destruction of countless jobs in manufacturing. It was an insult to members to support him. Jon Cruddas had progressive credentials that were very weak and very recent. He had discovered he opposed NHS privatisation only the previous day – this was good, but it would be nice if he had found this out a bit earlier. He had supported ID cards, foundation hospitals and war in Iraq. Nevertheless, he was probably the least rotten of a poor bunch. We should support him, but hold him to account and not give him a blank cheque.

A final NEC member spoke in the debate, and wondered how likely it was that Jon Cruddas would be elected. Perhaps we should back someone else, or have other options.

The General Secretary replied to the discussion. If John McDonnell had been on the ballot paper, the support for him would have been more reflective than the nominations – but he didn't even get Meacher's votes, there was no way he could have got on the ballot paper; it had not been in our power as it was MPs who nominated.

On the deputy leader, Alan Johnson was the likeliest alternative candidate, if we wanted him. It was 'pseudo-left' to attack the left but make no comment on a right winger.

If we didn't nominate Gordon Brown, how could we get our members to support him? To be trying to denigrate Brown and then going to our members asking for votes would put us in the position of some fringe unions. We had not got a fundamental move from New Labour. We were always going to Have Gordon Brown. It was a question of how to influence him and his policies. Strip it away, there was no one closer to our policies than Jon Cruddas.

Deputy General Secretary Tony Dubbins endorsed this view. There was one person who had made it clear that the issue was not about becoming Deputy Prime Minister, and that was Jon Cruddas. That was what was driving the other candidates. Labour wouldn't win the next election unless the party could re-engage its activists. Labour was losing activists hand over fist, against the backdrop of a resurgent Conservative Party. The media would be behind the Conservatives. Labour couldn't win without foot soldiers knocking on doors. This was the opportunity to put someone into the senior leadership of the Labour Party.

The NEC meeting was inquorate. The Chair said that there was a precedent for dealing with this, which we had used for a rule change in the past. We could take a vote at the meeting, and send ballot papers out to the members who were not there. We couldn't have a situation where we had no position.

An NEC member felt that it was wrong for the NEC to ignore its own procedures. The quorum was there for a reason. This was not the way to go. If the meeting was not quorate, we simply had to convene another meeting and seek a quorum then. London Region had the same problems.

A vote was taken on whether or not the NEC could take a decision on the basis proposed. This was overwhelmingly endorsed, with one person voting against. A further vote was taken to endorse the National Political Committee recommendation of Gordon Brown and Jon Cruddas (again, with one NEC member voting against).

The meeting concluded some minor items of other business, primarily discussing NEC speakers for Policy Conference.