

Statement on proposed Unite rule changes

Just two months ago the result of the ballot on the new Unite rule book was announced. The rule book was approved by 281,357 to 13,948, a massive majority. The turnout was around 17%, higher than that for the Executive Council elections in March.

No one believes that all the more than a quarter of a million members who voted for the rule book had read through all the detail. Members voted "YES" because they wanted to see the merger consolidated and Unite going forward as a single union. They had been excited by the promise of Unite and what it has already achieved.

Unite has won real enthusiasm from its members and, more generally, from across the movement. The victory at Grangemouth, protecting a final salary pension plan, and of the Shell tanker drivers over pay, demonstrated just what the union was capable of winning. Disputes involving Unite members, including the current bus dispute in London, and the ballot for strike action over pay in the NHS, have demonstrated that Unite is a union that the bosses have to take notice of. The organising approach has been proved to be more effective than a servicing approach.

We want to see this enthusiasm harnessed and taken forward. We support the full integration of the union, and the ending of the separate Amicus and TGWU sections that was due to take place with the implementation of the new rule book on November 1st.

However, a proposal is to be put by the Joint General Secretaries to an emergency meeting of the Executive Council on October 9th to delay integration by six months. Two reasons are given.

The first is to allow for an election for the General Secretary of the Amicus section. Apparently, the union has been provided with legal advice that Derek Simpson will have to retire when he reaches 65, in December 2009, rather than the year later that was expected from the Instrument of Amalgamation, unless he wins a election in a ballot of members.

The second is that insufficient progress has been made on integration. It was reported to the last EC by Tony Woodley that some senior officials in the union were deliberately blocking progress.

We do not believe that either reason is sufficient to delay the full integration of the union. The merger was not supported by members to keep a General Secretary in a job for a year after his normal retirement age; it was to ensure an effective union more capable of fighting for its members. If senior union officials are putting up roadblocks to full integration the answer is not to delay, but for the Executive Council to hold those officials to account.

If we believe the full integration of our union is the key in fulfilling the promise of the merger, then now, of all times, is not the time to delay. Progress towards integration will only be helped by keeping to the timetable already agreed by members.

Tens of thousands of our members in the financial services industry are facing redundancy because of the banking crisis. UK manufacturing is shrinking at the fastest rate for 17 years. The economic crisis threatens all our members. At the same time we are being hit with runaway prices and a Government seemingly more interested in propping up the City than helping the people who put it into office. We echo Tony Woodley's speech at the Labour Party Conference: "There's no doubt that this corporate greed must be stopped." That can only be done by a united union.

We need our industrial sectors to be fully integrated with elected lay leaderships if we are to meet the challenges of the economic crisis. We need the integration of our lay and officer structures in the regions if we are to be effective on the ground. We reject the instruction to Amicus officers to not accept regional reorganisation of responsibilities. We think every senior officer in the union should be pushing forward an integration agenda not looking for difficulties. We want integration of the membership systems and do not believe there is any justification for keeping them separate. We want the integration of union finances. It is nonsense that there are still two sets of accounts. We believe that an election for the General Secretary of half our union – a half that will disappear organisationally immediately after the election – would be a distraction from the real work we need to do. The job of one full time officer, no matter how senior, is not more important than the fight for the jobs of tens of thousands of our members.

A rule change by the Executive Council is unlikely to end the legal disputes. Indications have already been given that the proposed rule changes will be challenged on at least two grounds. Any legal cases could stretch on much longer than the proposed six month delay. We do not wish to see the union focussed on internal legal issues with uncertain senior officer responsibilities while our members in the real world are faced with bearing the costs of the economic crisis. We did not lead the union into this legal quagmire. We opposed challenging the rules at the Certification Officer. We accepted that the members had voted twice by ballot for the timetable arrangements for the Joint General Secretaries retirements. But a year extra in office for a Joint General Secretary is too high a price to pay for slowing down the integration.

The union should be fully integrated without delay if we are going to fulfil our promise to our members. We believe the adoption by the Executive Council of this rule amendment would prove to be a disservice to our union and our members. We must be in a position to act as a single union onwards from November 1st.

Editorial Board

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