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Britain

The crisis in working class representation

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The Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT), which organizes transport workers, has long played a pivotal role in British politics. It was one of the trade unions involved in launching the Labour Party in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since the rise of New Labour, it has been an increasingly strident critic at the political as well as the industrial level.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/rmt_workers.jpg] RMT workers demonstrate in London

But while the trade union has backed the Scottish Socialist Party in Scotland and the maverick Forward Wales in that country, in England the union has not supported Respect.

Nevertheless, the union organised an important conference in January this year to discuss the question of working class representation. While it was not a delegate conference, and mainly attended by far left activists, never the less it was a significant event. Greg Tucker reports:

They were turning people away at the RMT's conference on the crisis of working class representation. Yes, the RMT had booked the small hall at Friends' Meeting House but it was still impressive. Three hundred people packed into the hall whilst another hundred were left outside.

Those who did get in were able to take part in a useful, if limited, discussion on the future of the left in Britain. The failure to renationalise the railways, the part-privatisation of London Underground and Labour's continuation of the Tories' anti-trade union legislation have long caused RMT members to question their relationship with the Labour Party.

Labour resolved the question by expelling the RMT because of its support for the Scottish Socialist Party. So at the last two RMT annual conferences delegates have agreed resolutions calling for a wider debate about the problem of political representation. This conference was the result. Somewhat half-hearted in its implementation, but nevertheless a historic step forward. Committed to taking no decisions, the meeting was always going to be limited.

A long list of platform speakers threatened to crowd out a real debate from the floor, but in the end an impressive number of people got to speak, and a real debate did take place. Almost unanimously the debate rejected Labourism in any form.

RMT General Secretary Bob Crow opened the meeting by refusing to commit the RMT to launching a new political party but did argue for a new national shop stewards' movement to rebuild a fighting trade union movement.

By his logic the emergence of such a shop stewards' movement would be a necessary prerequisite for the building of a serious new party to the left of Labour. In contrast, SSP convenor Colin Fox, speaking next, outlining the development of the Scottish Socialist Party, showed that in practice it was possible to combine both strategic tasks - building a united left in struggle whilst building a new left party. The key was open comradely discussion.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/bobcrowe.jpg>] RMT leader Bob Crow

Whilst John Marek from Forward Wales, Jean Lambert from the Greens and Liz Greene from the Socialist Labour Party (the organisation set up by miners' leader Arthur Scargill) had little if anything to say, Dave Nellist from the Socialist Party (SP, British section of the Committee for a Workers' International) argued for support for the SP's campaign for a new workers party. Arguing for such a party to have a clear anti-war, anti-privatisation programme and plugging their conference in March. his call seemed to have moved beyond mere self-serving propaganda to be

something the SP see as practically necessary. However suspicious one might be based on their past record, it is clearly necessary to engage with their arguments.

The other platform speaker, left Labour MP John McDonnell (secretary of the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs) might have been expected to defend work through the Labour Party. He did not. Instead he talked of the need to build united fronts to confront capitalism. Rubbishing debate about organisational forms, he urged that we concentrate on working together in practical campaigns. New forms might emerge from the struggle, he argued, but you got the impression that as long as he was allowed his space in Parliament he would not be in a hurry to create them himself.

There was a big vacuum on the platform. Respect had not been invited to speak. Whatever the reasons for this sectarian error the absence of a key Respect speaker was at least ameliorated by the choice of speakers from the floor. Alongside a number of Socialist Party members who spoke of the need for the RMT to take the step in joining with them in calling a new party into being, a series of Respect members were called.

They were able to present Respect as the serious party of the left, going places after its breakthrough general election results. Whilst Respect National Secretary John Rees was somewhat triumphalist and fell flat, other Respect speakers addressed the need to engage with Bob Crow's call to rebuild a rank and file movement in the trade unions, whilst also actually building a new party of the left by building Respect.

The conference finished with a pledge from the RMT leadership that they would take seriously what had been said in considering whether to proceed with any other actions. Attendance on the day had mainly been drawn from the far left. RMT members were in a small minority and other independent trade unionists not present in large numbers. This meant among other things that the audience was largely white, ageing, and male.

Nevertheless, the fact of the event being called by a serious trade union had a disciplining effect on all speakers and the discussion, apart from a handful of veiled references to Big Brother, was conducted in a comradesly fashion seriously engaging each other's arguments. There is clearly a potential for further meetings to address the problem of how to proceed to fill the vacuum left by Labour. RMT activists will be calling on the union's Executive to set in train such a process.

But if we are to go forward the RMT leadership needs to be more serious, getting commitments from other union forces, preparing itself before hand, involving all forces including Respect. If it were to do so then it would be possible to progress to a higher level than has been possible up to now.