



Central Executive Council Political Special Report

ANNUAL CONGRESS 2012

THE BRIGHTON CENTRE

**SUNDAY 10 JUNE 2012 to THURSDAY 14 JUNE 2012
9.30am–12.30pm, 2.00pm–5.30pm**

CEC POLITICAL SPECIAL REPORT

THATCHER'S LEGACY

In 1997 the success of the Labour Party at that year's General Election was greeted by the trade union movement and indeed overwhelmingly around the UK with hope, joy and relief in fairly equal measures. The Thatcher/Major governments from 1979 to 1997 had engineered huge social change with mass unemployment, attacks on public services, and in particular education and health provision. The ideological move to private sector provision in local services, health and social housing all marked the Tory march to dismantling state provision in favour of private profit.

It seems a long time ago now, but those of us who lived through it should never stop reminding people of the destruction of our industrial and manufacturing base and the social problems that followed in its wake.

The price our members and our communities paid was mass unemployment, and a generation of young people whose only chance of work lay in short term schemes. We saw schools, begging parents for money, not for skiing trips or special projects, but for the purchase of books, or roof repairs or a new boiler so children did not need to wear their outside coats in class to keep warm!

And hospitals where patients were stacked in corridors on trolleys because of a shortage of beds, and yes, some died.

The same Tory governments conned the British public into virtually giving away public ownership and control of energy, water supply, and communications.

Margaret Thatcher never rode a public train in all her years at Number 10 that anyone can remember. So our railways and any possibility of an integrated transport policy passed to the hands of the profit takers with disastrous results.

In our local authorities and hospitals a race to the bottom on wages and standards opened up public services to exploitation and profit taking, all under the conquering phrase of "value for money", as services worsened, hospital wards became harder to keep clean, we saw levels of infections caught by in patients on a scale Florence Nightingale would have recognised!

The privatisation of our elderly in residential care was a new "market opportunity" for the city.

The list could go on and on. Well, some may say, that is all a long time ago, what's your point?

The point is this, New Labour swept into power, because people wanted a change!

NEW LABOUR'S LEGACY

All sections of our society came out to give the Tories the boot in 1997 and Labour achieved a landslide victory winning seats in parts of the country it never dreamed of succeeding in.

The problem is to this day, there exists within the Labour Party, those who believe that those results had nothing to do with how unpopular the Tories had become, but was down to New Labour marketing and all that needs to be done to win at the next election is to repeat the New Labour strategy and tuck the party just to the left of wherever the ToryLib government take us and, hey presto, the British public will flock back to Labour on the ballot paper.

Such belief is misplaced, indeed it is the classic denial logic of an alcoholic who thinks just one more drink is all they need to get the courage to take the cure.

Between 1997 and 2010 close to five million people stopped voting Labour. A few predictably went back to the Tories, some to Nationalist parties, and a shed load became so disillusioned that they just stopped voting.

Traditional areas of support were taken for granted in pursuit of new friends in the city and the media. The influence of Murdoch and News International over governments will probably never be fully known, but its power was there for all to see, after all why would Prime Ministers or wannabe's travel half way around the world to sit at the court of the "dirty digger". Even now, with all the revelations of law breaking, corruption, abuses of power, how silent so many politicians are about the Murdoch empire from which they conjured favour.

So a new Tory government takes up the reins on privatisation but not from where the last Tory government left it, but from where New Labour took it forward.

Let's be honest, of course New Labour in government did some good things.

- The extra investment in hospitals and schools were not only desperately needed but the electorate demanded it and were prepared to pay for it which they did without complaint. It is a shame the vehicle of PFI was used, despite trade union warnings of its shortcomings, an expensive disaster.
- New Labour created employment both in the public sector and by stimulating demand created private sector jobs as well.

But New Labour fell under the spell of the free market Gurus. The private equity brigade and a breed of city and financial speculators who made Del Boy from Only Fools and Horses, look like St Francis of Assisi.

Building social housing was ignored in favour of continuing the Tory policy of private sector provision through landlords, with the state picking up the bill, by way of housing benefit. The end result has been the billions passed to the pockets of private landlords many of who have tax affairs which remain cloudy, and the blame now passes on to tenants!

All this money and, barely a handful of council owned social homes built in thirteen years of New Labour.

And in health and education, New Labour vision was for private sector provisions from foundation hospitals, and school academy's to cleaning, catering and clinical services.

Well, we have the minimum wage, four weeks holiday pay, rights for agency workers and limits on working time. In practice the first two had to be extracted over years of reluctance to do either of them and the second two were finally delivered thanks to the European Labour Party who withstood awful treatment from New Labour in Downing Street in order to keep faith with the promises made to working people up and down the land.

And some advances were made on workplace rights such as representation, recognition procedures, and protection against dismissal during lawful industrial action.

But harsh realities remained: the gap between rich and poor widened under New Labour.

- Family tax credits were matched by reduced tax rates for private equity speculators on over leveraged, over priced takeovers and buy outs.
- Freedoms from cost controls over energy suppliers and a complete failure to protect our people from the greed of the city speculators and their bonus culture left New Labour unable to balance social justice with an expanding economy.
- The reliance on the city and financial markets to prop up our economy was a stupid mistake which this union and others saw ending in tears.

The UK economy is out of balance as we have been telling successive governments for years.

A lack of real manufacturing strategy over the last thirty years has added to the major problems of our economy and the tragedy is that those who benefited most from all this will end up paying less towards our recovery whilst those who had no control or influence over the current crisis are the one who will end up losing most and paying more.

The British public, our members, have bought into the need to bite the economic bullet, as a movement we must face up to that fact. However, the anger against those who took us into the deepest recession and the largest financial crisis in modern times is still as fresh as ever and the cuts and austerity measures from this Government has brought us unemployment and double dip recession.

We must use that to ensure our members become active in shaping the politics of the Government, whoever wins elections.

The Labour Party: re-engagement with Social Justice

The fundamental questions which now face the GMB and other trade union affiliates focus on whether it is possible or even desirable to rely on a Labour Party victory at the next election and whether such a victory will produce the workplace rights improvements and the social justice changes which never materialised in thirteen years of previous New Labour government, no mainstream party has any policies which even begin to redress the imbalance in the workplace, the imbalance of power of employers over employees. Individual employment rights and collective rights need action to help re balance that situation.

It is nonsense to suggest that there is no difference between Labour and the Conservatives on the issue of workplace and employee rights, indeed already after only two years of Government, attacks have been made on qualifying periods for claiming unfair dismissal proceedings at an employment tribunal as well as seeking to create a financial wall blocking off access to justice for thousands of working people who are victims of bullying, victimisation and unlawful treatment at the hands of bad employers.

And the Government will go further, gurus at Number 10 already favour introducing laws which allow employers to get rid of workers because their face doesn't fit, or they don't fit in. In other words sacking anyone the employer wants to when they want to, because they want to. A battle ground awaits us, there is no point or logic in thinking that you can keep your head down and get through this.

The GMB will have to fight these political attacks and campaigns for workplace and trade union rights. This is not the question. How we do it and what vehicle we use is.

Politically, the Labour Party potentially still offers working people the best route to economic and social justice, but if their agenda is more of the last thirteen years it is doubtful they will win the next election, let alone have the courage or political will to address the issue of workplace or trade union rights.

- The GMB and all other affiliates will have to be far more aggressive in our arguments for progressive economic and social policies than we have been for some time.
- The GMB cannot however just afford to rely on the current policy process designed by New Labour which is so discredited, in order to ensure our key objectives become reality.
- It is clear we need to launch, build and sustain specific policy goals and place them into the mainstream of the political agenda.
- Force the issues of employment rights, social housing, equality, tax fairness, trade union organising freedoms and full employment into the battle ground of the next election.

No candidate knocking on our door for support should be able to walk away without answering our questions.

THE FUTURE POLICY DIRECTION OF THE LABOUR PARTY AND THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNION MOVEMENT

The wider political issues which surround elections have to include workplace rights and tackling exploitation and vulnerable employment issues. Our task is to form a broader alliance with other unions, including some not affiliated to any political party and put these issues centre stage.

Trade unions have millions of members, and more millions in the wider family. The mobilisation of these people for trade union issues is long overdue. A strategy like this will cost a lot of money to ensure it is effective at the ballot box.

The spending of our political fund on political campaigning for working people's rights seems both logical and is likely to be supported by the overwhelming number of GMB members, irrespective of how they currently vote.

The challenge for us is as it always has been: Do nothing and moan or stand up and sort out the problem.

Our members deserve better from the politicians of this country. It is time we turned up the heat on policies rather than personalities.

This Congress is pivotal in reshaping our relationship with the Labour Party but also to go much further and create a new policy objective which empowers our union to campaign for employment and social issues independently of any political party.

In previous years we introduced annual evaluations of the work of those MP's whose constituency received financial or organisational support from GMB.

We have ended our relationship with some and strengthened it with others.

This process will be enlarged, we want to provide support to those who share our values politically and this should be done at the expense of those who seek our financial and organisational support yet fail to grasp the need for social justice in any context other than words in a game of scrabble.

The trade union movement must organise training support for prospective public office candidates, and TULO is the perfect vehicle to adapt to do this.

We have had some limited success in helping to secure the selection of more parliamentary candidates with trade union and real life experience.

We must go much further, organisations like Progress, have grown up within the Labour Party to carry the flame of New Labour. They have resources, influence and large networks. Their aim is to get those who support their ideals selected as candidates. Those who support more privatisation of public services, oppose trade union and employment rights improvements are not those on the same page or perhaps even reading the same book as this union.

Within the ranks of New Labour grew a body who saw the Labour Party as a vehicle for personal advancement and ambition, rather than how they could contribute to a better life for all.

To these people trade unions were an outdated, unwelcome set of uneducated, argumentative workers who barely knew a Sauvignon Blanc from a Pinot Grigio and whilst those attitudes took a nose dive when so many lost their seats or leadership ambitions, it is clear a battle is upon us for the future direction of a Labour Party designed, and born to bring to Westminster, social justice for working people through the ballot box.

The GMB needs to enlarge its political organisation. To target local government accountability where so many of our members actually work. We have seen in places like Islington Council what can be achieved by rebuilding a united Labour Party at local level.

- We need to re-engage our key activists to join with others and rescue local CLP's from falling membership.
- We need to insert into Labour the industrial organisation that we are experts at.
- We must above all accept no more diversions from those who have never had a real job in their lives!!

The GMB and other affiliates such as Unison, Unite, CWU, Usdaw, Ucat, Aslef and others represent millions of working people's voices. It is time to make ourselves heard above the chatter of the dinner party brigade.

A new direction of resources, effort and intent. Not outside the Labour Party but inside and alongside.

The GMB must do what it is best at, campaign for those policies our members want.

And to do this we must re-organise our Political structures to bring about greater accountability.

1. A systematic approach to bringing Political education and activism back to our members.
2. A GMB Councillors network with services and a budget to keep the latest up to date information flowing between the Union and its activists in all parts of the Country.
3. The re-instatement of Political Education courses so that a whole new generation can discover our Political roots and help re-define our future Political activity.
4. The re-establishment of Regional Political Officers.
5. Political progress reports to be part of every Regional Committee agenda.
6. Regional Councils will receive Political reports.
7. GMB expects Labour MPs and Labour candidates to accept invitations to GMB Branches and organised workplaces so the grass roots views of members are heard.
8. The GMB Executive Council will expect the Leader and the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party to accept an invite to speak to the Executive at least annually.
9. Regions have developed Political campaigning methods like Team GMB, which has been so successful in elections, sometimes putting over one hundred GMB members, many of whom had never been involved in Political activity before, into key seat struggles.
10. GMB will begin Training programmes for those members who wish to consider running for public office.
11. GMB will campaign for Trade Union and Employment Rights as well as core issues like full employment, equality, affordable social housing and a decent education and health care system for all.
12. Every GMB member should receive an annual report detailing the Political activities of the Union, and the key objectives for campaigning.
13. The GMB will continue to play a full role in the Trade Union and Labour Party Liaison Organisation (TULO) as well as developing stronger relationships with non-affiliates of the Labour Party.
14. The GMB National Political Department will be re-structured and re-organised to ensure the delivery of our key Political objectives and policies.

The GMB will continue to review its effectiveness on Political campaigning, and will work with the Labour Party and others to advance our members interests, but we cannot be shackled to any element which is going in opposite directions to ourselves.