



MEMBERS BULLETIN OCTOBER 2021

UNISON: A REPLY TO ATTACKS ON OUR RECORD OF FIGHTING THE RIGHT-WING BUREAUCRACY

This Members Bulletin has been produced for Socialist Party members in answer to attacks made on our party by Socialist Appeal in relation to an ongoing disciplinary process against Paul Holmes, a Unison branch secretary and the national president of the union. Members Bulletins are internal documents in which, in a structured way, party members can discuss

confidential matters, particularly so in this case given the sensitivities involved in writing anything while the proceedings have yet to be concluded – circumstances which make Socialist Appeal's sectarian determination to make scurrilous attacks in the public arena even more irresponsible.

1. The Unison branch secretary and union national president Paul Holmes is involved in a disciplinary process conducted by the Labour council in Kirklees in Yorkshire. He has also been suspended by Unison, a decision taken nearly 22 months ago in December 2019 when the union's national executive council (NEC) was under the control of the right-wing. Although suspended he has still been eligible under the union rules to stand for election to the NEC – although not to take up his position – and earlier this year he headed a left slate that won an historic victory in the union's NEC elections.

2. Given this election result and the Unison right-wing's history and its willingness to collude with employers in the past, (which Socialist Party members have themselves been victims of) many good activists in and out of Unison have seen this as an attack on a trade unionist and have instinctively come out in support of him.

3. However, some like Socialist Appeal (who have less than a dozen members in

Unison), have launched an outrageous attack on us, stating that “the employers and the union bureaucracy have been supported by the sectarian antics of the Socialist Party”. (Why we must defend Paul Holmes – and reject sectarianism, 13 September 2021) They scandalously claim that is because “the Socialist Party regards Paul not as a comrade to be supported, but as a political opponent to be destroyed”.

4. This is a disgraceful slur that means that, very reluctantly, we have no choice but to give as full an explanation as is possible (given that proceedings have not yet been concluded), that refutes their outrageous and dishonest allegations against us.

Distorted timeline

5. The Socialist Party has a proud, spotless record of opposing union victimisation by employers and witch-hunts across the labour and trade union movement, particularly in Unison, whether or not we are in agreement with those who are targeted

or even if they are an opponent. As we will show, despite our concerns about Paul, we have worked as part of the left in the defeat of the right-wing in the NEC elections.

6. The Socialist Appeal article dishonestly tries to set out a false sequence of events that Paul Holmes has been targeted because of his campaign to become Unison general secretary in autumn 2020 against the right-wing candidate Christina McAnea, and then later heading up the challenge to the right-wing in the NEC election that took place this spring.

7. However, Paul Holmes was suspended by his employer and the union in 2019, before he was even selected to be a general secretary candidate for the UnisonAction (UA) group within the union. Socialist Party members along with others raised their concerns in 2019 about Paul's suspension and its impact if selected as the left candidate at internal UA meetings (which Paul refused to answer and stormed out of one meeting saying he was withdrawing his name as a candidate).

8. The Socialist Party position has been consistent on this matter from the outset. We wrote an internal statement to UA in December 2019 stating that "given the history of our union in using disciplinary action and regional supervision as a way of removing 'left' branches, many good activists will rightly be suspicious of what the union is up to", but when "an activist from the branch who is also the women's officer says 'As I understand it the complaints that have gone in, have not been from the regional leadership of the union nor full time officials but have come from activists in the branch who have had concerns', we should take note".

9. "After all, is anyone here suggesting that women reps who are not right wingers making complaints of bullying and harassment should simply be ignored? Is

anyone suggesting just because you are on the left that you can never behave in an unacceptable manner?"

10. The statement concluded: "We understand that many good activists and socialists will fear that, whatever the legitimacy of the claims or not, the union bureaucracy will seek to use it for political ends" and we therefore proposed "a jointly agreed independent investigator and if necessary an agreed independent panel".

A consistent approach

11. As Socialist Party members reported to UA in 2019 Paul Holmes has faced allegations from a number of female left activists in the branch. In an earlier article, Socialist Appeal claim that Paul Holmes is facing 'trumped up charges' but offer no evidence why they believe this is the case. The Socialist Party is unaware of all the details of the specific allegations against Paul Holmes but it is absolutely correct that there should be a right for union members to make them and to be given a proper hearing. The Socialist Party has a consistent approach to these issues. We wrote a statement in 2013, in response to a discussion in Unison at the time on combatting violence and bullying against women in the workers' movement (<https://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/16503/11-04-2013/combating-violence-against-women-a-socialist-perspective-on-fighting-womens-oppression>).

12. We were responding to a statement by Unison activists titled, 'Our Movement Must Be A Safe Space For Women'. It contained many good points, and was signed by a number of prominent left trade unionists and activists, including John McDonnell MP. However, we did not sign because it stated unequivocally that "when women complain of male violence within our movement, our trade unions and political organisations should start from a position of believing women".

13. We agreed that the workers' movement has a key role to play in combatting the male violence, harassment and intimidation that many women face. However, we argued that "the statement bends the stick too far, effectively arguing that the workers' movement begins by concluding the man is guilty, regardless of the evidence, or lack of it. Instead the statement should say that trade unions and political organisations should start from a position of taking all claims of violence made by women very seriously, and carry out a thorough investigation, in a way that is sympathetic to the woman making the accusation".

14. We have the same position today. It cannot be assumed that a complaint is automatically justified, but we also believe that union members and workers have the right to make complaints and be taken seriously and listened to and, of course, that those who have been complained about have every right to defend themselves. Some lefts, including even some of those who signed the 2013 statement on believing women, seem to have disregarded this approach in regard to Paul Holmes's case. This leaves them open to the accusation that they don't take complaints seriously when they are made against other lefts.

Who really splits the left?

15. This doesn't mean that we think that the process has been correct. On the contrary, we think that the allegations should have been heard far earlier and that the hearing should have been dealt with by the union, via an agreed independent panel, rather than being left in the hands of the employer. Paul Holmes and his supporters on the NEC were wrong not to have been raising this – including the injustice being done to the complainants by the delay – over the past 20 months or so that he has been suspended.

16. Of course, both the employer and the Unison right-wing were fully capable of exploiting the situation for their own ends, particularly if the left were not prepared to campaign for an expeditious handling of the complaints. This is the reason why Socialist Party members in Unison argued that Paul Holmes would not be an appropriate left candidate for the 2020 general secretary contest, regardless of our differences with him on other issues.

17. Socialist Appeal, however, want to paint a picture that the Socialist Party is on a sectarian path, standing in union elections as 'spoiler' candidates to split the left votes. They are joined in this claim by John McNally, a former leading SP member in PCS but who left our ranks in 2019 as he was unable to stand up to Mark Serwotka's attack on our party, a signal of Mark Serwotka's trajectory away from the union's previous militant stance. (See PCS: The Real Issues At Stake, in Socialism Today No. 221, September 2018, at <http://socialismtoday.org/archive/221/pcs.html>)

18. They conveniently forget that in the PCS assistant general secretary (AGS) election that triggered Serwotka's offensive against us, it was he, along with John McNally, Socialist Appeal and the SWP, who refused to accept the Left Unity vote for the incumbent AGS Chris Baugh, a prominent Socialist Party member, and supported a senior full-time official, Lynn Henderson, instead. The result was the splitting of the Left Unity vote, allowing John Moloney from the AWL to win.

19. Since then, without the check of a healthy Left Unity, the PCS leadership has tacked right, to the extent of Mark Serwotka in his own words "parking" the full national pay claim in March last year at the beginning of the Covid lockdown, over the heads of the NEC, with only Socialist Party members and our allies standing out against this capitulation to national unity. This without one word of criticism from the likes of John McNally, Socialist Appeal, and the SWP.

The formation of UnisonAction

20. The Socialist Party has always looked to build a healthy, open and democratic left in Unison with a fighting programme, as in other unions. We played a key role in the formation of UnisonAction, in the aftermath of the 2015 general secretary election, which could have been an important step in this direction. However, the discussions around a left general secretary candidate revealed that other forces didn't want to seek agreement on this basis. We put forward Hugo Pierre so that amongst other issues, the role of cutting Labour councils would be put on the election agenda, something opposed by others in UA.

21. Socialist Appeal forget that in the Unison general secretary election, despite our concerns about Paul Holmes standing, after the nomination stage our candidate Hugo publicly called on Paul Holmes, backed by John McDonnell, and the other anti-Prentis/McAnea candidate AGS Roger McKenzie, who was supported by Jeremy Corbyn, to come together to discuss agreeing one candidate to go forward to the voting stage. This could well have resulted in us giving critical support to Paul Holmes, as we did in the NEC nomination vote. Unfortunately, this offer wasn't taken up by either candidate.

22. We took a similar approach in the previous general secretary campaign in 2015, even being prepared to stand down for Heather Wakefield, who does not have a consistent left record, if it meant one general secretary candidate against the Prentis-led bureaucratic machine. It was from this election, in which for the first time Prentis failed to win over 50% of the vote, that we pushed for the formation of a new left and, from 2018, pushed for a discussion on the programme for a united challenge in the 2020 contest and who the left candidate might be.

23. At this stage, until late in 2019, others in UnisonAction were promoting the

candidacy of the local government service group executive committee chair, Glen Williams, while we were raising Hugo Pierre as the candidate (and the SWP were suggesting their member, Karen Reissemann, although with no expectation that she would be supported). Significantly Paul Holmes was not being pushed as a candidate and it was only after Glen Williams withdrew from consideration that he signalled his firm intention to stand.

Working together on the NEC

24. What was clear from the general secretary contest was that a united left challenge in the NEC election that followed could win a majority for the left. Socialist Party members appealed for discussions so that a left bloc could be agreed but this was not uniformly achieved, with the Time For Real Change slate headed by Paul Holmes contesting positions against strong Socialist Party candidates who had stood previously, including the health service group executive member Adrian O'Malley (who narrowly lost to a right-winger as a result). Nevertheless, four Socialist Party members were elected on to the NEC, who have since made every effort to co-ordinate with the Time For Real Change supporters.

25. The allegations by Socialist Appeal with regards to the conduct of the Socialist Party NEC members recently also reveal their total lack of understanding and are frankly untrue. Prior to the first meeting of the new left-majority NEC, Socialist Party members approached the Holmes camp to seek agreement over candidates for the presidential team, the union's TUC general council seats, and the chairs and vice chairs of the key committees that control the union. Unfortunately in the main this call was ignored, leaving us to guess what was going to be proposed or at best simply told late in the day what their slate was going to be, which ignored anyone but them.

26. However, in the first post-election NEC meeting, we argued that the left should not put forward Paul Holmes for the position of national president. This was because he was suspended by the union and wouldn't be able to take up his position as part of the three-person presidential team. This meant that after such a historic victory against the entrenched right-wing, which needs to be consolidated, the left would voluntarily weaken a vital counter-weight to the bureaucracy.

27. We were also concerned that if another left NEC member didn't stand for the president's position, McAnea could argue that the right-winger should be 'acting' president. The undemocratic manoeuvres on the Labour Link committee prior to the Labour Party conference, shows how our concern was justified. Given that the Time For Real Change group had 37 votes out of 68 on the NEC (plus the four Socialist Party members, giving a clear left majority), we were able to stand April Ashley as a means to undermine the right's possible manoeuvres, without risking a right-wing voting majority.

28. The accusation that our members voted for a right-winger for an NEC sub-committee is just totally false. In reality, we strived to come to agreements over chairs and vice-chairs with Paul Holmes's group but despite our members being overlooked – with Hugo Pierre, April Ashley and Jim McFarlane having huge experience on the NEC and impressive records as fighters – we voted for the left candidates.

A mistaken path

29. Similarly, we advised against standing Paul Holmes for the TUC general council because that seat would be left unfilled as long as he is suspended. The role that the Blairites played in their war of attrition against Corbyn's Labour leadership shows the danger of not taking decisive action against the right, and using every position possible to do so.

30. It is clear that our concerns about Paul Holmes are not related to any political differences between us, which we have and always will openly state, but are totally due to the character of the allegations made against him and by those who have made them.

31. We have therefore been fully justified in warning the left against making Paul Holmes the leader of the challenge against the Unison right-wing over the past 20 months or so. It has been a serious mistake for the Time For Real Change left, after such a victory, to fight the right on this ground.

32. They are unnecessarily threatening the victory over McAnea and the bureaucracy, instead of consolidating it so that Unison can be transformed into a fighting union that can take on the Tories and the employers, including the cutting Labour councils.