



Affiliation or victory? The case for continued independence of Britain's RMT.

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If there is one element of certainty that highlights the poverty of strategic thinking and the general desperation on the British left, it is the complacent view that the Labour Party is the vehicle for social change. Despite recent memory and history itself standing as significant witnesses to the contrary, the prevailing attitude in the movement is 'all hands to the pump', that is, to get behind the Party as a unifying objective. This is not to say that the Labour Party does not represent an important avenue of struggle with which the left must engage. How trade unions, social movements and campaign groups engage, in light of the Party's historical role, must be considered.

At issue here is the case of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) which will vote at the end of May on whether to affiliate to the Labour Party, potentially ending decades of leading from the front as an independent and radical force in British politics. The independence of trade unions has never been an exceptionally popular position within the British left. There has never been a more difficult time to hold this view, but a strong case for the independence of the RMT must be made.

The RMT was expelled from Labour in 2004, formally because of the union's decision to allow branches regional autonomy in their support for political parties. Certain branches of the RMT consequently affiliated to other parties.

The problem ran much deeper, however. The union had stood its ground during the Blair years and fought New Labour throughout the 90s, campaigning against rail privatisation, for removing anti-trade union legislation and for protections in the shipping industry. The RMT's position became clear: if Labour would not defend the core demands of organised labour, then organised labour would make its own defence. The RMT subsequently became the opposition outside of parliament, and was at the forefront of efforts to establish a number of networks and political parties, notably the No2EU electoral alliance and the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition.

These failed projects highlight a feature of British electoral politics: voters tend to vote based on party loyalty, over the merits of a candidate or platform. A previously undefeatable Labour MP for Liverpool Broadgreen, Terry Fields, was banned from the Labour Party and stood as an independent candidate in 1992. He was electorally destroyed by an unheard-of outsider, Jane Kennedy, simply because she stood as the Labour Party candidate.

The RMT's inability to succeed in its projects, even in coalition with the entirety of the radical left, forms the backdrop and makes the question of affiliation inevitable. The case, however, is flawed.

Three arguments for, and why they are wrong

The Assistant General Secretary of the RMT, Steve Hedley, gave three reasons in a public Facebook post which are the bedrock of the pro-affiliation position.

First, it is argued that the RMT will secure an 'extra vote' in the Labour Party, particularly at Constituency Labour Party meetings. This isn't true. Labour leader John Smith abolished the block vote in 1993, and in 2014, Ed Miliband implemented a one-member one-vote policy toward Labour leadership elections. Members of the RMT are already free to become members of the Labour Party or to register as individual supporters. Local branches of the RMT are already able to affiliate to Constituency Labour Parties if they want to.

Second, the case proposes that following affiliation, the RMT will be able to sit on the National Executive Committee (NEC). This would technically grant some power to the RMT in the internal deliberations of the party, but not very much. Even in the extremely unlikely scenario of every single union affiliate (there are currently 12) voting unanimously on an issue, they would remain unable to move a motion without the support of other sections of the NEC, which includes the Parliamentary Labour Party (the group of elected MPs) and former Labour leaders.

Third, pro-affiliationists suggest that the RMT would be able to further shape Labour Party policy, particularly its manifesto. However, like other trade unions and social movements, they are of course able to shape the manifesto by exerting social pressure from outside the party. Taking a global view, there is no evidence that affiliation to a political party produces outstanding benefits or more progressive policy beyond that which the strength of the union is able to achieve anyway.

The German metalworkers' union, IG Metall, remains formally independent of all political parties and yet exercises enormous influence over national policy. This is true to such an extent that in 2008 it was consulted on the government's response to the financial crash. Other examples include the New Deal in the USA, won by labour unions unaffiliated to the Democratic Party, or the construction of the NHS itself, a plank of the Conservative manifesto introduced to appease organised labour (O'Connell, 2017).

These muddled arguments for affiliation are at least counterweighted by potentially catastrophic costs.

First, the RMT in Scotland has, time and again, taken anti-Labour Party positions - in its previous affiliation to the Scottish Socialist Party, or its decision to support national independence in the 2014 referendum (Green, 2014). The decision to allow branch autonomy was not only a direct response to Labour's indefensible positions, which the union had sought to distance itself from, but also to avoid conflict between parts of the union with different views on the national questions. Affiliating to Labour threatens the unity, perhaps even the existence, of the union as a national body.

Second, while the Labour leadership happens to be progressive today, this deviates from its historical role. To say that Labour 'might' swing right again would be to mischaracterise the organisation's purpose. The Labour Party has only ever intermittently positioned itself at the centre-left, and even under the leadership of Attlee, the party was involved in the unforgivable crushing of working class organisations in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Greece and Italy.

It's not necessary to detail the crimes of previous Labour governments against working people, nor is it necessary to agree with the assumption that Corbynism will end with Corbyn. The argument remains that affiliating now, while the party deviates from its historical role (though not by very much), is to take a risk which is not even necessary. In fact, if Labour wins the next election, the RMT will be able to keep its hands clean of the inevitable failures and compromises, while we build class power.

A not-altogether-unimportant footnote to this discussion is that the RMT leadership under Mick Cash, a life-long Labour member who supported affiliation during the Blair years, has ultimately found the excuses he needs to end the militant legacy of Bob Crow and cement the position of the union as a Labour vassal, which will remain in that position long after Corbynism goes as with the legacy of Michael Foot.

Third, and most importantly, it will distract the union from its real objective, and the only programme of action which can ever really secure policies which benefit working people: building class power. The job of a trade union is to increase its own capacity to defend its members at work. If Labour lose the next election, the RMT will be well placed to pick up the pieces of a shattered Corbyn project and to remobilise Corbyn's supporters into actual workplace organising.

The RMT's next step

The ultimate power of organised labour rests in its ability to strike, to organise, and to mobilise – not necessarily in parliament or in the political arena itself. The job of a union is to

maximise its capacity to do these things, and to carry them out. On 30 May, it will be up to RMT members to decide whether to remain an independent trade union capable of lending a helping hand to political efforts as and when needed, or become fundamentally subordinated to those efforts as a piece of machinery in electoral campaigns.

What is needed now, more than anything, is a trade union movement which can organise beyond campaign cycles. The Labour Party may, at certain times, play a significant role in improving the lives of working people, it may play a limited role, or even a reactionary one; but the job of the trade union movement is to fight for its own political and economic objectives consistently as a social force, which will push any government or opposition party to the left.

When asked how purely syndicalist and militant grassroots organising could ever produce political change without developing a political party for itself, Auguste Blanqui scoffed, with marvelous coherency: 'Let the party apply the necessary reforms. I myself have no programme.' (Blanqui cited in Ridley, 1970). Somehow these few words, absolved by historical record, make the case themselves.

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