

## **A scandalous travesty of democracy**

Some of you may have noticed that the major trades unions supported Gordon Brown in his 'coronation'. You may have wondered, along with many union members, why unions which were potentially faced with strikes against Brown's public sector 'reforms', his pay dictat of 2%, his jobs massacre, the introduction of a market into the health service, and other minor differences, offered their support to this proselytiser for 'flexibility' and the free market. This is, after all, a government which declared in the European Union that the right to strike was not a fundamental human right.

What you have to understand is that these great leaders of ours are trying to 'influence' this 'son of the manse'. What better way to influence him than to...well, show that we don't want to make life difficult for him. For instance, to try and avoid a strike in the NHS, which might disrupt the government's 'reform'. We must not do anything which risks the achievement of the glorious 'fourth term' with Gordon at the helm, must we?

One of these union's, UNISON, is balloting its health service members on the government's slightly revised pay offer. It's Health Service Group Executive, when discussing the revised offer, was split down the middle, voting 17 to 16 to take the spineless position of not making a recommendation on the pay offer. Call me cynical but you would struggle not to interpret this as expressing the hope of the union apparatus that members voted to accept what is effectively a wage cut. A quick wink to Gordon, with the message, look what we've done for you?

Such an interpretation has been reinforced by an extraordinary letter sent out to the Health branches by Karen Jennings, the union's National Secretary for Health.

"The Health SGE agreed specifically not to recommend either acceptance or rejection of the offer. It is therefore extremely important that branches and elected members of regional or national committees should not undermine that agreed policy. To do so would be a breach of the "Democracy in UNISON" guidelines.

This circular emphasises that union bodies at national, regional and branch level must observe and respect the union's policy position which was democratically agreed by the Health Group Executive on 25 July 07. In addition it is important that Branches are aware of their obligation to ensure that they promote and implement agreed policy."

Just in case anybody missed the drift, the letter says that the latest offer is the best that can be gained by negotiation. If any of you members haven't cottoned on you are supposed to vote in favour of this pay cut.

This is an incredible conception of democracy which is attempting to place bureaucratic obstacles in the way of branches and members campaigning against acceptance of the pay offer. Jennings letter came as a bolt from the blue to SGE members. On whose authority did she send it out? I wonder if she had a word with Dave Prentis?

I have read the "Democracy in UNISON" guidelines and I cannot find anything which would preclude a branch from campaigning against a pay offer which they think is unacceptable. Ironically, the guidelines say that their purpose is to "promote and establish a member led union" and "encourage the maximum democratic debate".

So a vote by 33 people, divided 17-16, means that health branches are tied to the 'discipline' of the SGE and cannot campaign amongst their members for rejection of the offer? Is this the maximum democratic debate? This is a scandalous travesty of democracy.

A 'no recommendation' position is usually an abdication of leadership. It is a common bureaucratic ploy when the bureaucrats really want the members to vote yes but calling for a yes vote would risk the ire of the members descending upon their heads.

Jennings letter is an attempt to deny the democratic right of the members to use the only vehicle they have, their branch, to campaign against this deal. It serves to atomise the membership into isolated individuals, rather than collective members of an organisation which has a genuine democratic debate and reaches a collective decision.

Hopefully those branches which have any life will tell Karen Jennings what to do with edict.

What is particularly contemptible about this attempt to 'discipline' their own members is that it takes place in the context of a situation in which the government is destroying the NHS as a national organisation, introducing a competitive market for patients. And what are the unions doing to challenge this? Why they 'criticise' some aspects of government policy whilst thanking the government for all that extra money. They make 'balanced' comments (the positives and negatives of government policy) whilst ignoring the fundamental fact that the NHS is being destroyed before our very eyes. In short, their relationship with New Labour is more important to them than the interests of their members; the very people whose subscriptions pay their bloated wages. A genuine struggle against would risk the divorce they fear.

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