

Welsh Labour Grassroots

Gwreiddiau Llafur Cymru

Welsh Labour Conference bulletin • February 2007

Why We Need a Third Term

In the coming Assembly elections, the people of Wales will have the opportunity to re-elect a Labour administration that has shown that there is an alternative to New Labour policies. For Welsh Labour, education and lifelong learning are not a business opportunity for millionaires – they are intended to serve the cause of social justice, providing a route out of poverty and inequality for some of Wales' poorest communities. The NHS in Wales has no foundation hospitals, and, if Labour wins in May, hospital cleaning will no longer go out to private tender. Welsh Labour says it will introduce proposals to radically redistribute resources and opportunities towards the children living in greatest poverty, with the aim of eliminating child poverty in Wales by 2020.

Rhodri Morgan, in a major speech delivered in November, entitled, '21st Century Socialism – A Welsh Recipe', stated openly that the New Labour project has run its course. He argued for a reassertion of the role of the state as a force for good in politics, and emphasised the importance of fighting inequality. Most Labour supporters in Wales will recognise in Rhodri's words, and in Welsh Labour policies, something of their own convictions as to what a Labour government *should* be doing. They will surely feel more affinity with the Welsh approach than with New Labour's agenda for public services, based on consumer 'choice' and market forces.

Of course, things aren't perfect. Some of Welsh Labour's policies do not go as far as many of us would like. The present devolution settlement may not allow Welsh Labour ministers to do as much as they would wish. Nevertheless, these policies represent a progressive alternative to Blairism, with 'social justice' as a sincere aspiration, not just a soundbite. It is therefore essential that we do everything we can to ensure that Labour wins a third term, with a working majority. This *ought* not to be a problem. There is evidence that many of Welsh Labour's policies, from school breakfasts to free bus travel for the over-60s, are popular with voters. The other three parties in the Assembly seem to have run out of ideas, resorting to gesture politics and petty point-scoring. However, Blaenau Gwent has shown that it won't be easy. The Tories and Plaid may have fallen out but the danger remains of a post-election 'rainbow coalition', based on a right-of-centre programme draped in Welsh national colours. We cannot allow this to happen without fighting for every vote. But why have we got such a job on our hands to win in May?

Blair threatens Welsh Labour's achievements

The answer is not to be found in Cardiff Bay, but in Westminster. For four years now, the illegal war of plunder

in Iraq, and the lies that justified it, have glowered like a dark cloud over every Labour campaign. The cash-for-honours scandal brings Labour into yet further disrepute. Blair's unhinged foreign policy, his attacks on the public sector, his very presence in Downing Street, are our biggest vote-losers. He has to go **NOW**, before he does any more damage. What a tragic waste it would be if the Assembly's non-Blairite programme were derailed by a backlash against Blair! In the election campaign, we will have to distance ourselves from many Westminster policies, while persuading voters that those coming from Cardiff are a progressive alternative. We will have to work hard to persuade voters to think in Welsh, not all-British terms. We will have to battle against the hostility or indifference of the media towards Welsh Labour's agenda. Turnout will be crucial.

Whatever the policy differences between London and Cardiff, falling membership and demoralisation are as real in Wales as in England. Welsh Labour must abandon its heavily 'top-down' approach, which allows activists too little say. A change in the party's political culture would reflect the break from New Labour policies. There are signs that this may be starting to happen – the abandonment of private tendering for hospital cleaning was a suggestion from Aberconwy CLP – but more needs to be done. If the next UK government is a Tory one, Welsh Labour will need active popular support to defend its political independence. But that won't happen if party members have decided there is no point in staying around because they get so little say. We need to open up the party, not only as an end in itself, but because that is the best way to defend Welsh Labour's progressive agenda.

We also need to look beyond the Assembly elections, to the Labour leadership election. All the likely candidates have the Iraq war on their consciences. They are jointly responsible for privatisation beyond Thatcher's wildest dreams and have all presided over a catastrophic decline in membership. All, that is, except John McDonnell. He alone wants to have the discussion that we really need: is Labour to be a party of US-led war and plunder, or a party of peace, and justice? Is it to be a party of private profit, or of public services, accountable to those who use them? Is it to be a party accountable to its members, or to its donors from big business? Welsh Labour Grassroots is backing McDonnell's campaign because only there are these questions even discussed. In Wales, we can assist the campaign for socialist renewal in the Labour party as a whole by demonstrating the practical examples of non-Blairite policies in action, and by being a part of the campaign throughout Britain to rebuild, regenerate and democratise the party.

DAVID MORRIS (1930-2007)

Welsh Labour Grassroots supporters, like a great many others, were deeply saddened by the sudden death of our former chair, David Morris, on 24th January, four days before his 77th birthday. Dai – as he was usually known – dedicated most of his life to the causes of peace, socialism, democracy and internationalism. He was a key figure in the Welsh labour movement for many years and inspired deep respect and affection for his integrity and passion and his generosity of spirit. His unshakeable political convictions were inextricably linked with his devout Christian beliefs; he was an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church, which he served in both Rhayadr and Newport before re-training as a youth and community development worker. He entered politics as a full-time occupation in 1984, on being elected to the European Parliament, but he had actually joined the Labour party in 1945, at the age of fifteen, and he was to remain active in the party for the rest of his life, despite his increasing concerns about the party's direction in recent years.



Dai made his mark in Europe, promoting aid to former colonies and working for reform on issues like animal welfare and the transport of nuclear waste. At the same time, he remained active in the peace movement – serving as chair of CND Cymru from 1990 to 2001 – and in the Parliament for Wales Campaign, among many other causes. He was popular within the labour movement and

among his constituents but his outspokenness did not endear him to the party leadership. In 1999, when the European electoral system was changed, leaving Wales as a single constituency, Dai was placed in an unwinnable position at the bottom of Labour's list and he withdrew altogether. Rather than settle into an easy retirement, however, he immediately resumed his political work as a rank-and-file activist, securing election to the Welsh Labour Executive and using that platform to campaign against New Labour's right-wing policy agenda and especially its support for the US 'war on terror'. As a passionate Welsh devolutionist, Dai was delighted by the establishment of the Assembly and was very much encouraged when Welsh Labour began to pursue a distinct policy agenda of its own, clearly to the left of the Blairites in London. He helped to found Welsh Labour Grassroots, as an organisation critically supportive of the Welsh Labour leadership, while opposed to the New Labour agenda and the erosion of party democracy. As the first chair of WLG, Dai made a vital contribution to our group, as he had with so many others. We will miss his inexhaustible enthusiasm and faith in the possibility of a better world, as well as his unflinching good humour. He is an example to those of us he leaves behind. Our thoughts go out to Shirley, Dai's partner throughout his most politically active years, his constant companion and comrade in every battle.

Open up the conference – support reference back of SOC report!

As usual, a couple of perfectly good motions, which were submitted to this conference, have been ruled out of order by the Standing Orders Committee (SOC). One is a rule-change from Cardiff West CLP, which seeks to allow conference to discuss non-devolved matters where these affect Wales. This was put to conference in 2005 and controversially pronounced 'lost'. Now, the SOC says that the motion can't be re-submitted until next year, although the rules stipulate a limit of "a period of two years from the time such declaration was made." Now, 2005-07 = a 2-year period in our book, so let's get this on the agenda NOW! The other motion is from Swansea West and deals with the need for greater transparency within the party. The SOC, however, has objected to a clause calling for the

Welsh conference agenda to be circulated a week in advance – on the grounds that the agenda comes into being only when the Standing Orders report has been accepted at the beginning of conference. This is nonsense: the British party always issues a provisional agenda well before conference begins and there is no good reason why we couldn't do likewise in Wales. If delegates were to amend the SOC report, a supplementary report would simply have to be issued, detailing the changes (as has happened before). Finally, we strongly support the motion from Neath Port Talbot County Party, calling for action to address the complete lack of black or Asian members representing Welsh constituencies, either in Westminster or in Cardiff Bay.

WELSH LABOUR GRASSROOTS CONFERENCE FRINGE MEETING

Friday 23rd February 2007, St. George's Hotel, The Promenade, Llandudno, 6.00–8.30 pm

Speakers: SUE ESSEX AM Assembly Finance Minister • **SUE LENT** Assembly candidate & chair, Cardiff Stop the War coalition • **JOHN McDONNELL MP** Chair, Socialist Campaign Group & Labour leadership candidate • **CLLR. DEREK VAUGHAN** Leader, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council & WLGA

ALL LABOUR PARTY & AFFILIATED UNION MEMBERS WELCOME

WELSH LABOUR GRASSROOTS is a rank-and-file activists' network that works for the democratic renewal of our party and the development of a socialist policy agenda for the twenty-first century. For more information, please contact us c/o 2 Wellington Mews, Wellington Street, Cardiff CF11 9BE. Tel: 029 20 221943. Email: dazza1970@tiscali.co.uk.