

unite's 'united left' no-platforms alberto durango

by Chris Kane

There was uproar at the UNITE London 'united left' on Thursday night when any discussion of the Mitie workers' dispute at Willis was blocked and the sacked UNITE cleaners rep at Schroeders, Alberto Durango, was denied the opportunity to address the meeting.

Two branch officers from the Clerkenwell and St.Pancras Branch of UNITE who have supported the sacked cleaners attended the meeting – the Secretary Monica Gort and the Organiser Chris Ford, and also some lay reps. They came with Alberto a member of the UNITE Cleaners Branch Committee. They attended expecting to secure solidarity from other UNITE activists in London in widening support for the cleaners and to back calls for Asst. General Secretary Jack Dromey to reverse his withdrawal of support for the dispute. The complete opposite occurred.

From the start there was a witch-hunting atmosphere at the meeting, peppered with red-baiting of critics. The shenanigans would have put New Labour to shame. It began with the controversial railroading of a decision to hold elections to a 'united left' committee. A slate had already been circulated beforehand which put the named few in their posts for two years!

When the chair outlined the agenda efforts to ensure the cleaners' dispute was to be discussed were met with a complete refusal by the chair that did nothing to disguise his hostility to the victimised workers and their supporters.

The reasons outlined had nothing in common with what you would expect from a trade union branch, never mind a union broad left which stands for a "lay member controlled, democratic union, which is responsive to the needs and aspirations of its membership, operates in a spirit of open debate, tolerance, and fairness, and opposes authoritarian and dictatorial approaches".

* First he said he had not been notified in advance by the required two weeks for an AOB item – Monica Gort and Chris Ford pointing out that they had emailed him and other officers: which he denied.

* Then he said there were people at the meeting who disagreed with the dispute, who clearly were given some kind of veto over other people's opinions.

Repeatedly the chair shouted down UNITE reps who wanted the cleaners to be able to report on their struggle, and repeatedly the chair threatened to have UNITE reps Monica Gort and Chris Ford thrown out of the meeting, though in contrast nothing was said to his supporters who levelled verbal abuse at Chris Ford: a Socialist Party member had to intervene to halt this.

When it came to the agenda item on industrial disputes, reports on the dispute at Visteon, the Rob Williams victimisation and the situation on the London Buses were given extensive time for discussion. During this agenda item Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell MP in particular were also the subject of serious smears over the Visteon dispute by Rod Finlayson, who described "the so-called left-wing MP John McDonnell" whose friends, he noted, were at the meeting. The Chair allowed those attacks to take place without interruption.

Once again there was an effort to get the cleaners' dispute discussed, the responded this time with renewed hostility stating this was a subject that "should be discussed by people round a table" and that there were six people from the cleaners branch who did not agree with the Willis dispute and attacked a "group of people who had never been at a meeting before who had come along". The group concerned being a sacked member of the Cleaners Branch Committee and members of other branches. Essentially the rules imposed were if your face doesn't fit you don't get a say. Once again there was a threat to have people thrown out who disagreed.

It was only thanks to the assertiveness of a shop steward of the Socialist Party that the issue of the meeting being able to discuss the subject was put to the vote. The vote was lost in what some people said was questionable counting, with 29 for a discussion and 38 against. All of the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party comrades voted in a principled manner, one exception being Bronwen Handyside of the United Socialist Party who voted against a discussion!

The decision of the united left meeting in London was nothing other than a disgrace: it is difficult to see how such people can in any way be associated with the "left" at all. Essentially the broad left of UNITE in London agreed:

* Not to support migrant workers who joined UNITE to improve their working lives and have been sacked as a consequence of their activity as union members.

* Not to support a leading activist of the UNITE cleaners and a Branch Committee member who has been arrested at the employers' behest and sacked on spurious grounds.

Not only will the united left do nothing to help these workers but it has decided it will not even be prepared to allow them to speak at its own meetings on the subject: it would not even allow its members to debate the dispute.

A section of the united left in London have fallen into agreement with or been duped by the smear campaign emanating from the hierarchy of UNITE against this group of migrant workers who took their union assurances to defend them in good faith.

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soas occupation ends with mixed results

by Taimour Lay

The occupation at SOAS ended disappointingly on Wednesday with a victory rally but few real gains. A statement released in the afternoon admitted that the ‘concessions’ made by Director Paul Webley and the senior management were ultimately more ‘symbolic’ than real. For many of those involved throughout what was often an inspiring protest against last Friday’s despicable immigration raid – an attack which SOAS facilitated and still refuses to apologise for – the question remains: Why did the occupiers walk out when still in a position of strength?

Some members of the occupation were shocked to read the ‘victory post’ that went up on the FreeSOAScleaners blog on Wednesday afternoon, and have collectively released a counter-statement today (to follow shortly...) to temper the triumphalism. It calls not only for the continuation and renewal of the campaign against ISS, union-busting and collaboration with the Border police, but stresses that lessons must be learned from the occupation after so much promise and negotiating strength on Monday evening was allowed to dissipate in the rush for a deal.

The drift towards agreeing to Webley’s offer – one that was not voted on at any stage, even on Wednesday morning – was driven by a hierarchy of three or four SOAS students who had been conducting negotiations, combined with the SWP’s eagerness to claim a victory, and the general sense among a majority of occupiers that things were getting “riskier”. There was, without doubt, a gap opening up between some more concerned about the “threat” of eviction than others, and the panic decision-making that the mass meetings degenerated into was seemingly born out of that.

The problem of the negotiators pushing for a deal, and the imbalance of information and power that entrenched, became seemingly unstoppable by Tuesday night. While it reflected



the divisions between the occupiers – in politics, outlook and organising principles – that began to emerge once the management started making offers, however derisory, it might have been more effectively countered by focusing more clearly on the cleaners’ key demands – namely, the guarantee that SOAS would not facilitate any future raids – and by reassuring the majority that the threat of eviction was not as high as some were claiming. (Indeed, it was known by Tuesday that the injunction that had been served was of dubious legal value. With Webley regularly threatening to evict throughout the day, only to then ‘give more time for negotiations’, it was clear he was trying to avoid having to use force.)

The strength still lay with the occupation on Wednesday morning. The ‘decision’ to leave has wasted the chance to win gains for the SOAS cleaners in detention and for those that remain to work in an institution that has proved itself complicit in union-busting and racist immigration controls.

The campaign continues but an opportunity has been lost.

twenty years since the ‘collapse of communism’

Twenty years ago a revolutionary wave on the scale of 1848 and 1919 swept across Eastern Europe and the USSR. It brought down the state-socialist regimes which called themselves “communist”. Western capitalism declared the “collapse of communism” and some spoke of the “end of history” with a new era of liberal democracy. Instead the era of neo-liberal globalisation brought a new phase of war and recessions: in Eastern Europe the optimism of 1989 gave way to economic shock-therapy and widespread impoverishment, while in the former USSR the old elite has been replaced by the rule of exploitative oligarchs.

What happened to the radical ideals of the freedom movements of workers and intellectuals which challenged the old regimes, which called for workers self-management, and end to all forms of oppression and alienation, which opposed the ruling bureaucracy and the restoration of capitalism? The legacy of totalitarian “communism” still hangs over us all; amidst the worse crisis of capitalism in decades there remains a real crisis of confidence in a viable alternative to this system.

Did communism really collapse? Can we develop a vision of an emancipatory communism in the 21st century? Speakers include the Ukrainian socialist Marko Bojcun and Allan Armstrong from Scotland’s Republican Communist Network.

Thursday 25th June from 7pm at the Artillery Arms, near Old Street station