

“The real enemy?” Why we should reject left unity as a concept



**Left
unity as
a
harness**

**Left
unity as
a
recruitm
ent front**

**Real
unity –
class
unity**

A number of pieces have been written recently on “unity” amongst the left and the ways we can achieve that. What follows are the reasons I reject left unity as a notion and the kind of real unity that the workers' movement needs – and, to a large extent, already has.

I've written about this previously in relation to specific issues, both [here](#) and [here](#). However, the issue rears its head again and again, and as certain struggles gain momentum the question will continue to crop up ever more frequently. So here I'll go over the two broad schools of left unity and why they only serve to undermine the class struggle.

Very recently, Owen Jones wrote [a piece for the Independent](#) where he argued that “Britain urgently needs a movement uniting all those desperate for a coherent alternative to the tragedy of austerity.” This, he said, should not be a new party or another Leninist front organisation but “a network” which would “give the angry and the frustrated a home” and “push real alternatives to the failure of austerity that would have to be listened to.”

This provoked a variety of responses. From Anticapitalist Initiative saying that the main flaw is “[low horizons](#)”; to Luke Akehurst insisting that this network is “[called the Labour Party](#).” However, they all largely miss the point.

The key point on which Owen's argument turns is the idea that “so long as trade unions ensure Labour is linked to millions of supermarket checkout assistants, call centre workers and factory workers, there is a battle to be won in compelling the party to fight for working people.” Not a new idea for Labour leftist, nor one which lacks lengthy critiques, of which Anticapitalist Initiative's is just the latest. But key here is that he is not asking everyone to join Labour

to move it leftward. Rather, he insists that a broad network which includes “those in Labour who want a proper alternative to Tory austerity, Greens, independent lefties, but also those who would not otherwise identify as political, but who are furious and frustrated” could by the weight of its own activity see Labour “face pressure that would not – for a change – come from the right.”

It doesn't take much examination to see why this wouldn't happen. Not least because, even at the moment in history where it was building its greatest achievement in the welfare state Labour was also [doing what all parties in power do](#) – serving the interests of capital. From wage restraint and breaking strikes to supporting imperialist war, “old” Labour was every bit as wretched as “New” Labour. The only difference was perhaps that illusions in it were stronger.

However, whilst the Labour right would reject Owen's network, the Labour left would support it for much the same reason the trade union left support embracing the likes of UK Uncut. It gives **them** credibility.

Over the past few years, there has been a growing mood of anger and defiance in relation to austerity. Crucially, that mood has found expression in movements and networks which have rejected traditional forms of organising and the hierarchy and bureaucracy which comes with it. From the likes of UK Uncut and Occupy, to the less activist-based [community resistance to Bedroom Tax](#). The myriad of Trot front groups have been unable to harvest that mood as they did with the anti-war movement, for example, and the trade unions have appeared as lumbering relics in comparison.

However, for the “left” unions like PCS and Unite, speaking that language has enabled them to piggyback off the sentiment. They clearly can't and won't support the most radical aspects of anti-authoritarian organising and direct action, because it threatens their role as mediators with capital. But if they support the watered down version they can harness the energy of this new generation of activists, giving themselves a faux-radical veneer. We know that Len McCluskey is all talk when he speaks of “[direct action](#),” but the rhetoric opens up a potential new subs base with more people joining his community branches and he gains a credibility that sees off criticism from the left.

A copycat move by Labour would have similar benefits. Whilst many people see through “Red” Ed Miliband, even now he is [trying to piggyback on opposition to the bedroom tax](#), supporting a “new, networked movement” which harnessed a safe version of the militant, grassroots resistance would give him credibility. No doubt the motivation behind the [Labour Left day of action](#) over the issue on March 16 – already condemned as [cynical astroturfing](#) by those organising on the ground.

Responses to such criticism are predictable. We should be fighting “the real enemy” rather than each other. We're all on “the same side.” Without “unity” we can't win.

Except that we're not on the same side. If we allow the anger and determination of working class people to resist these assaults to be funnelled towards electoral support for the likes of Labour, we lose. Those in government grant concessions to working class movements [when we are a threat to the status quo](#) and have the strength to disrupt capital. By conceding that power to the

hope that one party in power will be less ruthless than another, we give up all our weapons in the class war.

Far from being something we need in order to win, left unity in the sense described above will only guarantee that we lose. This goes whether Labour is holding the harness, or any [new party of the left](#) that might take their place.

This second form of left unity, virtually everyone will be familiar with. Whilst harnessing the energy of movements in a sanitised form doesn't actually require direct recruitment, the leftist front organisation nearly always has that as its explicit goal. First, join the united front (or popular front, in the SWP's case). Then, why not buy our party's paper? Finally, well if you join the party you can get more involved in the struggle – [sign here](#).

The most obvious problem with this type of unity is that it's not actually unified at all. In every popular campaign that crops up, each party has its own separate front. For every National Shop Stewards Network there's a Unite The Resistance and a Right To Work Campaign and a Coalition of Resistance and so on. And if more than one left sect is involved in one front, you can guarantee a split and the emergence of a new front sooner or later.

Alongside the now tedious Monty Python joke, however, there's also the draining effect the united front (of whichever hue) has on the movement it seeks to dominate and siphon recruits from. Owen Jones's citation of the Stop The War Coalition as a “crucial” contributions by the SWP actually shows how much the recruiting front and the harness for radicalism overlap. But they are a good example of this point.

Stop The War mobilised over two million people – and then led them, over and over, from point A to point B and back again. It grabbed headlines, people felt they had done their bit to oppose war, and the war went on regardless. This may have opened peoples' eyes up to the fact that passive, peaceful protest achieves little to nothing – but it did so in a way that [offered no alternative](#), suggested therefore that nothing was worth doing, and probably demobilised most of that movement out of politics completely.

Moreover, as we see time and again, such fronts brook no debate about tactics. They are rigidly controlled from above, their conferences and assemblies are little more than platforms for bureaucrats to sound off (with wannabe bureaucrats sounding off in the “open floor” sections) and they continually fail to do anything effective.

This is why we are best off dismissing them out of hand. Each time the latest [new rallying cry for yet another talking shop comes out](#), we're best shrugging our shoulders, leaving the fossils of the left to it and carrying on organising.

Having said all this, it goes without saying that unity – disentangled from all of the above – is something that the workers' movement needs. But it is not left unity, on the spurious basis that we all stand on roughly the same side of the political spectrum, that we need.

In practical terms, whether we organise in the workplace or in the community as tenants, claimants or whatever else, what unites us is the material conditions we share. In a word, our class. Our common enemy is not “the right” or “the Tories,” but all of those on the other side of the class divide – those who we have to sell our labour to, those who we have to pay rent to in order to keep a roof over our heads and those who run the state which serves this system where we're all subject to the process of money making more money.

By making class the basis of our unity, we necessarily exclude elements of “the left.” That radical activist who [busts unions and uses workfare](#), that union bureaucrat who [cuts a deal on pay cuts to “save jobs,”](#) that [union for screws](#), that party leader who accepts austerity but says it's “[too deep, too fast.](#)”

Moreover, this kind of unity doesn't demand that we all belong to the same organisation or front. For example, Solidarity Federation and Boycott Workfare following their own paths over unpaid labour hasn't stopped them both [making significant dents in the scheme together](#) or coordinating and supporting each others' days of action.

Likewise, the absence of a Trot front to dominate resistance to the bedroom tax hasn't stopped the campaign from flourishing. To the contrary, [open meetings are attracting huge numbers](#) and a broad variety of groups and individuals are getting involved and supporting effective, militant resistance. It has already rattled housing associations enough for them to [insist the scheme won't work](#) and seen some councils rush to head off resistance by [reclassifying homes](#).

Genuine unity doesn't mean us all signing the same membership form. It doesn't mean silencing criticisms of bureaucrats and would-be leaders. It certainly doesn't mean allowing ourselves to be harnessed as props for the left wing of capital. Rather, it means us standing in solidarity with each other as a class and taking direct action in our collective material interests, all the while openly and critically debating the best way to win.

That is why, in the name of real class unity, we should reject left unity.