

# Jerry Hicks. Wrong Era – Wrong Politics

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I am putting this note forward to challenge the claim of Hicks and his confederates that somehow he is the candidate of the left and McCluskey just another bureaucrat. It is time to go beyond the hallmark of Hicks and his cohort 's infantile attempt to see all those in official positions as the same, and to see McCluskey as someone whose occupation is selling out the R&F. The starting point for unravelling all of this is to consider Hicks' claim to be the candidate of the R&F. We need first to consider who the R&F are.

*So who are the R&F?* The main plank of Hicks' campaign is that he presents himself as the champion of the R&F, indeed their self anointed leader in waiting. There have been no meetings of this "R&F group" to democratically decide on a candidate; Jerry didn't even attend the last Grassrootsleft national AGM in November in Birmingham. He just elbowed any potential alternatives out of the race in late December, by anointing himself. Even the Catholic Church has to go through the ritual of an election by a conclave of Cardinals, but apparently not our "R&F"

Now, while any trade unionist worth their salt will identify with the R&F, who does Jerry Hicks speak for, and what does he mean by the R&F?

One thing I share in common with Jerry Hicks is that I joined a union in 1976. I joined the old UPW, I went on to join the SWP in 1976. I became a rep in one of the largest and most militant sorting office in the country, and went on to help found the Rank & File Post Office Worker Group with other SWP

activists.

Our R&F group was one of a number at the time, R&F Docker, Teacher, Building Worker to name a few. While they were called R&F groups in fact all they were, was the SWP and its periphery, with no independent political life of their own. Once the SWP decided to close them down they struggled to survive.

The point is that all of these R&F groupings, like the SWP of the late '70s and Jerry Hick's Grassrootsleft are constituted by either one or more political organisation, or groups of and populated by the organisation's membership and contacts. The fact that the GRL is comprised of people in different and no political organisations does not invalidate its political nature. Read their organisational structure clearly; it is a political formation with its own discipline and committee structure. Its political character is, I think shown rather neatly by the following piece of idiocy

For the right of the rank and file to veto all management decisions and workers control over all aspects of production, including hiring and firing, for workers' control over and nationalisation without compensation of all firms sacking workers in the interests of profit.

Call me old fashioned if you will but to me this demand is a call for dual power and rather than a union, they are demands for workers' council (soviets) linked to the formation of a workers' government. Now is it that the unite bureaucracy is stopping the members making this demand realisable (the bastards) or maybe is it a bit of an aspiration? ... and by the way this will not be a right – as if in a state of dual power these rights would be given to workers, rather it is something we will struggle for and take.

So do they represent the authentic voice of the R&F? Well only in a post modernist sense where by asserting something makes

it real. What Hicks and the political organisations supporting him have in common is rather than being part of the R&F they appropriate the term R&F as a label for their political project.

So when Hicks (SWP /GRL) speaks about the R&F he is inevitably talking about the political programme he wishes union members to adopt. This is not unique; all organisations attempt to influence the union in one way or another, to their own end.

Of course there have been many rank and file movements in the past which have been just that; movements. The common denominator which binds together all such R&F movements is they came into existence when a leadership pursues a policy opposed to members' interests –close down democracy, block a militant industrial action etc. Herein is the second problem for Hicks' use of the term R&F there is no movement because there is no *need for such a movement*. Consider the following:

- Are there any ban and proscriptions on organising in Unite? No, contrast this with the attacks on the left in UNISON.
- Is there any attempt to close down industrial action? No, this has been fully supported.
- Is there an attempt to promote industrial action? Yes, the Union has sponsored industrial action. For example enhanced strike pay.
- Is there a democratic lay member structure? Yes this was fought for and won against the old amicus leadership.
- Has Unite attempted to build the union through militant activity? Yes the organising unit is testimony to this.
- Is there lay member control over officers? Yes seen in the role of the Executive Council and in the NISC / RISC's.

These are the reasons there is no R&F movement. Does everything work in Unite? Clearly not, much seems to me dysfunctional. I could write out a list of errors, mistakes etc. However when I criticise the national leadership I do so in the context of the leadership building a democratic, open class struggle union.

Given McCluskey's record is one of strengthening the union, encouraging lay participation and providing a national political voice for members why do we have the spectacle of left groups campaigning against a strong effective fighting back left general secretary? Because Hicks (the SWP & GRL) have set up their watertight division between the R&F and the leadership, to admit anything other than the leadership are selling out the membership would break down that division and with it the political dogma on which they rest.

*Looking at the facts.* The real question for the R&F is this, has McCluskey strengthened or weakened our movement? What is his track record in the disputes where we have membership density? In the 3 biggest private sector disputes of the last 5 years, BA/Willie Walsh, construction/ BESNA and the London bus workers Olympic 500 campaign, Len was instrumental in achieving historic victories by building on the energy of lay activists with the resources of the full time administration and uniting the union in difficult struggles. Let's look at Besna and the Bus actions

The Besna dispute is viewed as being run and won by the R&F Indeed the dispute was going nowhere until Len called for the Organising and Leverage Department to work out a strategy for victory. At one of the final "R&F mass pickets" at Kings Cross station the construction workers present were vastly outnumbered by Left paper sellers. An excellent set of Unite leaflets in many languages were produced by the region and the organising unit, but the paper sellers steadfastly refused to give these to building workers going into work, choosing instead to distribute obscure tracts amongst themselves. The

dispute in London was rudderless and ineffective by this time. Any building worker present could be forgiven for thinking the circus had come to town rather than an effective trade union protest. –here we see how the term R&F can be used to mean anything you like. In this instance the R&F equalled the left rather than R&F building workers.

Then there was the Bus workers' dispute. In a major feat of organising the London & Eastern Region brought together workers from 20 or so bus companies and won what was described by the press as a union's first offensive victory in many years while Johnson bemoaned '...we stuffed their mouths with gold for nothing'. This presented a model relationship between officers, the lay officials and members. Also, as with Besna McCluskey supported the strike 100% providing the Region with the resources needed to win.

Of course with hindsight it is possible to criticise aspects of the tactics of these strikes however this would be to miss the point; the leadership enabled maximum support in which officers and lay members acted. There are a number of points Hicks and his friends should take note of:

- Rather than sell out these strikes the leadership supported them and led them in conjunction with the lay members. It would be good to know why anyone would think they would do anything else.
- Many strikes today (including the ones cited) can only be won by the R&F and leadership working in tandem. If unions are going to develop industrial muscle then there has to be a new relationship between the R&F and the leadership.

As one looks closely at Hicks' claims we can see he does not represent the R&F but has appropriated the term for his political project, the conditions to move the R&F agenda forward from being an amalgam of left wing groupings to a movement do not exist because of the openness of the

leadership and their commitment to militant industrial action. Indeed the entire rationale of the R&F candidate against the bureaucrat falls apart. It is however impossible for the R&F to admit that the union leadership could give full support to industrial action let alone sponsoring it. Unable to explain this, they either ignore it or they put forward rationalisations such as the trite, R&F pressure.

*What does Hicks stand for?* Once removed from his R&F wrapping what is Hicks' radical programme. This is what his web-site tells us:

**Some of what I stand for:**

- Branch restructuring is chaotic but can be remedied: No member will be re-allocated to a Branch without their prior agreement.
- The election of all officials, elected by members, not appointed by an individual or a panel.
- Lead a fight to repeal the anti union laws UK & EU and when necessary to confront them.
- For a General Secretary to live the life of the members they represent, on an average member's wage not a six figure salary.
- A Public Works programme, with the first jobs offered to blacklisted construction workers.
- The creation of one million 'Green' jobs. One million potential members

*Lead the fight?* It may come as a shock but Unite is in the forefront of fighting to repeal the anti union laws. Under McCluskey we have not repudiated any strike. So what's the point in this statement? I think it must be the rev, rev revolutionary bit at the end; '...and when necessary to confront them'. We are left wondering what that means, is it always right to confront them, should it be a tactical question when to confront them, who should decide, should you take into account the wider consequences for the union. The

statement is meaningless except as a polemical device of upping the ante.

*A Public Works programme, & The creation of one million ...'*  
For sure we need an alternative economic programme, now one can either put forward a revolutionary or a Keynesian programme but a couple of random slogans are not serious. There is also the not unimportant question of who will implement this call, how will you make this happen?

I guess these points are just there to make up a list, a botched attempt at transitional type demands

The meat of Jerry's programme is the following.

#### Election of officers.

This was debated at Unite's first Rules Conference in 2011. It was overwhelmingly defeated by democratically elected Lay delegates to the conference. So having gone through the Unite lay structures this key demand of Hicks has been rejected. Of course he has every right to raise it, but it is not something the GS can implement. Why make it such a big deal of this except as a political gesture.

I spoke against the motion for election of officers at that 2011 conference. Then as today there are several reasons why this would be a crazy idea for Unite:

1. How would officers be elected – by everyone (including retired members) in a region or by sectors?
2. Who would officers be accountable to – the members who elected them, or as now the Riscs regional committees and regional secretaries?
3. What member would leave his or her job to sign up for a limited time period of employment which in some cases could necessitate a wage cut?

4. Officers working in full time election mode, gravitating towards workplaces or factions in their allocations which deliver a decisive vote. This would detract from any objective strategic recruitment, organising or retention strategy. It would further plunge our structures and working life into a permanent state of confusion. It would give officers a political mandate, which should be the prerogative of the lay members.

5. Most importantly it would mean permanent factionalism in the union as left and right mobilised to get there person in office. Pity the rank and file!

Many of our members who see election of officers as a panacea for all our troubles are not informed that our present system of appointment by a Lay panel of the Executive Council, where no EC member can sit on an appointment panel for their own region, is far better.

The problems for the left in the union will not be solved by election of officers.

The answer to issues surrounding officer control is to make our lay committees and branches function more effectively, ensuring a proper lay scrutiny of officer performance and making sure the committees have the politics and confidence to tackle the issue of non performing, ineffective officers.

**Maybe Jerry Hicks only listens to the R&F when they agree with him, or maybe he is so out of touch with our new union's democracy that he is oblivious of this important decision of our Rules Conference.**

#### A General Secretary on a worker's wage

A further key pledge is to only accept an average worker's wage. Jerry says he is prepared to accept £26000 a year. When a leading Hicks supporter put this to a training course of reps and branch secretaries he was met with a mixture of



incredulity and laughter. As a long serving Branch Secretary put it- "that is less than I earn driving a bus in London-you must be joking!"

Unite is a general workers' union, where many of our members earn anything from around £25000 to £60000 plus for senior grades in some sectors. It has many hundreds of employees, manages many properties around Britain & Ireland and most importantly fights back on behalf of well over a million members. Ask the majority of our members if the highest position in our union, with such enormous responsibilities should be paid a wage that would mean you couldn't afford to live in many parts of London or Birmingham; you would not be taken seriously.

The issue of wages should be focused on negotiating more money and better terms and conditions for our members and increasing the amount of British and Irish workers covered by collective agreements, especially in the private sector. This is exactly what Lens strategy is aiming to do.

**This is an infantile plank of Jerry's platform. It shows an opportunist "showman" attitude which runs through much of his manifesto.**

Branch Reorganisation-a view from Unite's largest region Jerry started his campaign by stating that all individual members objecting to moving branch would not have to, that composite branches would stay, in effect, intact. He now has changed his position to agreeing with the principle but states Branch reorganisation is chaotic and accuses Unite of being dictatorial.

This issue really exposes Jerry Hicks as out of touch. In my region the process was carried through by our Lay committees reporting back to branches. The committee which oversaw the process consisted of myself, a Lay Regional Chair and a Lay Executive Council member overseeing, alongside the Deputy

Regional Secretary.

Every Chair and Secretary of our 23 industrial lay committees was tasked with bringing forward proposals. These were scrutinised and amended where necessary. The Lay Regional Industrial Sector Committees (RISCs) then debated all proposals and amendments, finalised their proposals and resubmitted them. Where there was an issue the Lay Chairs were again consulted and agreement was reached. Updates were reported to the Regional Committee, we even held a special Regional Committee to discuss proposals and progress. Composite Branch Secretaries were informed of the strategy. Branches affected were allowed to raise objections. Finalised proposals and objections were dealt with by the Lay Executive Council.

Why branch reorganisation? Unite was a merger of 2 unions. AMICUS itself was a merger of 5 unions. All with different traditions and culture, all suffering the scars of 20 years of employer attacks on our organisation and our fighters and activists.

One of the consequence of this was our composite branches with no industrial logic were allowed by our legacy unions to fill the vacuum. These composite were clearly bloated and dysfunctional in many regions and sectors. Yet within most, were many thousands of members who would be better organised in workplace, sector, or sub sector branches. In our Region we recognised this would be a better platform to rebuild our bargaining strength in the workplace and, alongside the 100% campaigns and Organising Units help to halt a strategy of managing decline. No only was it the right thing to do, it was done democratically bottom up. It also allows for new members to be better placed participating in branches which are organised around an industrial logic.

It is not difficult to see why many composite branch officials want to stop change. However it is beyond me why Hicks his SWP

and GRL are supporting this conservative block to developing a militant trade unionism. The only answer is simple opportunism; let's all abandon our R&F principles and garner a few votes by supporting the conservatives.

A policy which is now even more absurd when he demands 'No member will be re-allocated to a Branch without their prior agreement'. What is this nonsense? Let's not forget we have been through a collective decision making process, How are we to inform the members? What happens if, say, one decides they don't want to move do we keep the branch open? This is simply not serious it not only stinks of opportunism it should tell all, that Hicks has not a clue about how to lead a trade union.

*The Hicks programme and the union structure.* While Hicks has a lot to say about the R&F and industrial action the issue he fails to address the existing Unite structures and his view of them. We can guess by the fact he has held no lay office in Unite, as far as I am aware, he has never been a Unite delegate to a Policy or Rules conference. He has never sat on a regional committee or any of our Unite Regional or national Industrial Sector Committees. Despite his high profile attendance at many construction picket lines, he has had no experience of working within our lay structures; he has not been involved in the discussions within our union around our lay structures. This is one reason why the R&F approach is disconnected from, and unconcerned with our union committee structures, the sinews which bind the union together.

*Fighting the battle of several unions ago.* When you strip down what Hicks is saying, remove all the political verbiage, what makes sense comes from how craft unions organised and the radical tradition of militant shop stewards. Here stewards negotiated over pay and job control and along with the members of the shop had a large amount of autonomy from the Region and National organisation.

Many craft workers in Unite see this as the natural form of union organisation (as do many on the left, who would not know a capstan lathe if it hit them on the head. They have been told this form of union organisation is the road to militancy.) So Hicks can and does call on the past in his campaign and there will be many who like him wish to roll back the clock but it cannot happen.

Even if Hicks was to win (God help us) he could not run Unite on such lines. It may have passed him by but Unite is not a bigger version of the AEU. Even in workplaces where this model is still appropriate there is often an ineffective membership density, for example one of our SWP members (always banging on about the need to be more militant) had less than 5% density in his British Aerospace workplace, despite having a recognition agreement locally and national agreements. This is replicated to a greater or lesser extent across workplace organisation in semi skilled and skilled sectors. However if this was our only problem we would be in a far better place than we are. We are also faced with:

- A lack of stewards; Unite has far fewer stewards than the T&G had in the early '80s, and maybe even fewer than the T&G did in the 1950s when there was neither legal recognition nor any formal role within the union.
- Huge numbers are in workplaces where there are less than 50 members.
- Collective bargaining has declined from around 70% to 30%, large numbers of members do not have any bargaining rights.

Without collective bargaining and stewards to undertake it, craft unionism is not possible. So while a small minority within Unite are still able to function in this way the vast majority cannot. For the majority Unite is a general union.

If Hicks and his friends only kept their eyes open instead of putting negatives wherever McCluskey puts a positive, they

would see a new pattern of industrial struggles emerging which link together the 'real R&F (the members) and the full time officials but hay why bother about taking the class struggle forward when you can call black white much more fun.

Jerry's campaign is not a progressive campaign. He is standing against the most outstanding Left leader of the British and Irish trade union movement, a leader who has not repudiated one strike as General Secretary, who has given his support to all the major Unite industrial disputes over the last few years, British Airways, Besna, London bus workers. Len McCluskey is a General Secretary who has a clear vision and strategy; to rebuild union strength in the workplace and in working class communities.

Jerry Hicks' campaign is a bringing together of large sections of the sectarian left, who like Hicks live off dogma rather than address the nature of today's class struggle.

Jerry Hicks, is also, in my view going to receive a big vote from right wingers manoeuvring to undermine Len McCluskey's strategy for building a fit for purpose, fighting back union. The Right, not the Left will gain from Jerry's decision to continue even though he received only around 135 branch and workplace nominations to Len's nearly 1100. Jerry's campaign is more about the divisions and manoeuvrings in the sectarian left than anything else. More than that Jerry Hicks is clearly a member lacking the vision or politics to take our great new union, Unite, forward.

***Jim Kelly***

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