

DP/82/16 Wallasey CLP

Confidential

Wallasey CLP was suspended by the General Secretary pending investigation on the 20th July 2016 following the receipt of many complaints and counter-complaints about recent events in the CLP. Several members were repeatedly in the media making vociferous allegations about the Party. Accounts of key events appeared to be contradictory. An investigation was launched and approximately 100 statements were received, with a number of members interviewed. Some members remain fearful of repercussions if they speak out on these matters. For that reason, this report is anonymised. All respondents were helpful and spoke honestly to the investigation.

1. Local Party Environment

It appears that meetings in Wallasey have been increasingly adversarial and challenging for some time. Following the national trend, there has been a substantial increase in membership in Wallasey. A small number of these new members began attending CLP meetings, and it quickly became clear that their approach to meetings was at odds with pre-existing members. Previously, meetings had been small and there was not a huge amount of structure. A small number of the newer members felt that this was not acceptable, and were confused by the rules. Most meetings began with a difficult discussion around procedures and rules. Formal motions and scripted questions became a new feature of the meetings. These clashes raised tensions, and some members stopped attending meetings, citing a hostile atmosphere. The investigation found that meetings have become hostile and sometimes aggressive.

2. Campaigns against Labour Council

A small, but vociferous, group of new Labour members have engaged in a campaign against the Labour council, and have called for the deselection of any councillors who refuse to set illegal budgets. It was felt by some that these people only wanted to criticise the Party rather than support it. This includes motions to meetings, social media activity, and a Labour leaflet in one ward designed (but not distributed) criticising the Labour council. Leaflets for 2016 were delayed significantly in some areas because those involved could not agree on the message. Councillors expect that they will be deselected in the coming few years, based on the rhetoric that they have become familiar with in Wallasey.

3. AGM

The CLP holds most meetings as All-Member Meetings, but the AGM is a delegate body. Tensions were raised from the beginning of the meeting, as the meeting room was too small for all attendees. It became apparent that there were more people present than were delegated. The investigation heard differing explanations of the confusion over delegations. Some felt that the delegate list was inaccurate, whilst others felt that one part of a delegate list was falsified. The Chair and Secretary ruled that only those invited to the meeting as delegates could stay in the meeting. It was reported by all sides that there was much frustration and confusion in the room, for approximately 30 minutes. Some reported that tensions were raised and the atmosphere was febrile and increasingly frightening. It has been reported by several respondents that one member loudly threatened physical violence to another member during this period. Whilst it is unlikely that this threat would have been carried through, this created a frightening atmosphere, particularly for the older and younger members, who felt vulnerable.

When a vote was called on a proposal to postpone the meeting, it was reported that some members voted to continue the meeting 'and get it over with' as they felt that they would never return to another Labour meeting after those events.

The business of the AGM was conducted relatively smoothly, although there were few reports from Officers.

At the end of the meeting the new Chair appeared to agree to a debate on a motion that was ruled out of order at the beginning of the AGM. This is subject to contrary accounts. Some felt that the meeting was formally closed, so that the motion could be taken afterwards. Some felt that the motion wasn't taken, but a debate was held on the same subject and a 'proposal' on the same subject was taken from the floor. It is clear that some members left when the business of the AGM was finished, before this item. It is also clear that some older members were confused about the content of the motion or proposal, and did not understand what they were voting on. Amid this confusion, it was decided that the CLP would formally send Angela Eagle a letter. This letter contributed to the raised tensions that then followed.

At the same time as the suspension of the CLP, the CLP Secretary sent all members a motion she had received from a branch, regarding the allegations about the CLP, naming some members explicitly. Other motions had been sent to the CLP, including one in support of Angela Eagle, but only the one motion was distributed. Unfortunately this was a confusing time in the CLP and the new Secretary was establishing a new email address. The one motion that was sent was felt by some to be attacking some members specifically.

4. Allegations of homophobia

The investigation has found that some members have truthfully claimed that homophobic instances occurred during the AGM. Others truthfully said that they were not aware of those instances. It is possible for the events to have occurred without the knowledge of all members. The allegations are not that the CLP is institutionally homophobic or that members were aware of homophobia but took no action, but are specific to individuals. These allegations will be reported to the next meeting of the Disputes Panel regarding individual disciplinary action.

Some members felt that these allegations affected the reputation of all members present. Others felt that the angry and public denials of the claims led to some members feeling intimidated about coming forward to address their concerns.

5. Abuse

Over the summer there has been a high level of inter-member abuse in Wallasey. Members are angry about the action taken, and they were angry about the leadership election. This has resulted in genuine fear and intimidation of a small number of other members. This creates an environment in which some members are fearful to take part in the Party or raise their voice about any issue, as they see that those that do are subject to abuse. This culture is toxic and it is self-perpetuating.

One member in particular has endured a significant level of personal abuse. A hashtag was created to encourage people to 'shame' him publicly and his home address and personal details were published online. It is likely that this had a substantial detrimental impact on the member's family. A website appears to have engaged in a course of intimidating behaviour to this member.

There have been calls for members to be disciplined if they can't publically substantiate the complaints. This only perpetuates the intimidation. Instead of supporting those that are scared, members have been sent hand-delivered letters of condemnation.

A small number of members held a public meeting to discuss their concerns about the suspension of Wallasey CLP. The public meeting explicitly named some members. Some leaflets promoting this were distributed specifically to the houses of Party members, including brand new members. The Party received complaints about a breach of data protection in what appeared to be an abuse of recent membership lists. One member was personally criticised for this. This member is aggrieved that complaints claimed he was distributing leaflets when he was not present. It is not possible to establish with certainty whether Party membership lists were used to promote this meeting.

6. Campaign against Angela Eagle

It's highly likely that the brick thrown through the window of Angela Eagle's office was related to her leadership challenge. The position of the window made it very unlikely that this was a random passer-by. The window was directly between two Labour offices. Untrue rumours were subsequently spread that the building was occupied by many companies and the window was in an unrelated stairwell. This was based on a Companies House search which found that the landlord had a number of companies registered there; in fact the only other occupant is the landlord on the upper floor. Once this incorrect rumour was spread, members repeated it as clear evidence that Angela Eagle was lying. This is categorically untrue.

Regardless of the truth of the matter, there is no doubt that this event had a strongly negative effect on the local atmosphere, and it is clear that it put many people in fear. Instead of supporting frightened members, some people engaged in an angry course of abuse to those suggesting it was a politically motivated attack, just compounding the stress.

The office of Angela Eagle has endured a significant amount of abuse, including abusive and intimidating phone calls. Staff members were eventually forced to unplug the phone. The investigation has received many hundreds of abusive, homophobic, and frightening messages that have been sent by Labour members to Angela Eagle. Where appropriate, members have been administratively suspended pending investigation.

The office received a death threat for Angela Eagle, for which a man has been arrested. Instead of condemning this and supporting the MP and the office staff receiving this, members have questioned whether this really occurred. The death threat has been seen by the investigation.

The Police advised Angela Eagle to cancel her drop-in Advice Surgeries. Instead of expressing concern that matters should have reached this level, members called her a liar and suggested that the Police had done no such thing (the wording of the Police statement was advisory, as is the correct protocol).

In what seems like a co-ordinated campaign, the MP's office has been subject to 'Distributed Denial Of Service' attacks – the deliberate flooding of their systems.

Even if one did not believe these events happened, the comradely response would be to support fellow members in true distress. Members instead went to the press to insinuate that the allegations were lies.

7. Safeguarding

There are many members in Wallasey under the age of 18. Meetings are mostly all-member meetings so any young person could attend (and have done so), and even the AGM included members under the age of 18. These children should not be put in the unacceptable position of fearing Labour Party meetings. The Party has an obligation to create a welcoming and safe environment for young members.

8. Recommendations

The current atmosphere in the CLP is toxic and divided in the extreme. It is not possible for the CLP to safely meet in the current climate, and the Party should support them to move forward from these problems.

- It is recommended that the CLP be suspended subject to a review in the spring. The CLP should be supported to start meeting again, with oversight from the Regional Office, and a code of conduct for meetings should be put in place.
- The Regional office will facilitate meetings of the key stakeholders in Wallasey to discuss a joint-campaign strategy, policy issues, and CLP matters.
- During the suspension, any candidate selection should be conducted by the Regional Board.
- All role-holders in Wallasey should receive training on organisational matters before the end of the suspension. Formal meeting structures will help manage the tensions in meetings.

This report should not be used to exacerbate problems. Claims and counter-claims will not improve the environment, and we will not act on unsubstantiated allegations.