

An open letter to Labour Members of Tower Hamlets

“Parties inclusive enough to manage debates are winners. Parties spoilt by rancour, personality faction and division are losers. It is time to open up the system, loosen the control and re-empower the party.” Peter Hain.

Dear member,

I have been an active member of the Labour Party for thirty years – all of them in Tower Hamlets. I eventually joined the Party in 1980, aged 23, after previously being told that I couldn't join because it was “full up”! I have seen the party grow in membership and I have seen it slump. I saw the docks when they were a major employer in the borough and since their decline I have seen the development of Docklands – with its failure to provide enough decent job opportunities for local people. I have seen the NF and the BNP exploit local tensions on our estates and at the ballot box. I have seen the solidarity shown to striking miners and poll tax non payers. I have seen the expulsion of readers of the *Militant*. I have seen the near rout of Labour by Respect due primarily to the Iraq war and Respect brought into the Labour Group and their reduction to a rump at the last election. I have seen the fiasco of Liberal decentralisation taken to extremes in the Neighbourhoods. I have seen the Conservative vote rise and I have seen both good practice and bad faith in the local Labour Party.

I have seen close up the power struggles that have taken place both inside and outside the party throughout this time. I have held elected office in my branch party, on the General Committee, on the Local Government Committee (until it was closed down in 2005 by the NEC pending an investigation – that has never taken place), I am an active member of the Co-operative Party and the secretary of its local branch for more than a decade. I have stood for election to the Council three times and been privileged to be elected as a member of the Council. I was re-elected, unopposed, as the Tower Hamlets Borough Labour Party Secretary in the summer, a position I held until my recent “expulsion“ from the Labour Party. I am also a community and trade union activist.

I have always believed in grass roots democracy, that local members should make local policy and choose all their candidates for elected office. I have been a vocal advocate of the return of members' rights and for policies that address the divisions within our community. For too many years local party members have been stripped of their democratic rights and not been allowed to choose their local government candidates despite a majority of delegates to the General Committee (a body made up of representatives from all branches and affiliates) repeatedly supporting a return of full democratic rights for all eligible members.

I have seen close up the divisions within the party – divisions that are not always political. For years I have heard members whisper to me that “the Bangladeshis” do not want to participate in the life of the party and are only interested in packing the membership with votes to support their favoured candidates. Yet when they do participate, they are then accused of having a secret agenda – damned if they do participate and damned if they don't!

I have been a member long enough to have seen the local membership rise, fall and repeat that cycle. But any concerns about the validity of current party membership should be aimed squarely at the London Labour Party officers who scrutinise all new applications for local membership and have been doing so as part of their “special measures” programme for some years. It was the London Labour Party which decided that their scrutiny of membership applications was the best way to solve rumours of membership irregularities in the Borough.

I do recognise that local membership problems may persist – the reason for our “special measures” status – but despite requests the local party has never been given a “road map” back to full democratic rights. The “special measures” status has been used as a blanket to smother Tower Hamlets Labour, but for how many years must this continue? Even a prisoner knows how long their sentence is.

The heart of the problem is who controls Tower Hamlets Labour Party – should it be the members or should it be the hierarchy? Power struggles exist in all political parties: between differing policies and their advocates, and between careerists who will support what they think will get them into power and members who stick to their principles. The local Labour Party has always had power struggles – many of them reported in the pages of the *East London Advertiser* over the years.

Unfortunately, what starts as a spat in the local paper can grow out of control. In the run up to the May elections, Andrew Gilligan’s *Dispatches* programme attacked Tower Hamlets Labour Party for being infiltrated by Muslim extremists. One might have expected the London, or even national, Party to defend us, to explain the “special measures” which have been going on for several years to protect our membership. Instead, we saw the sad spectacle of the local Labour MP giving credence to these allegations.

Lutfur Rahman conducted an epic battle to make the final shortlist of Labour candidates for mayor, a process that saw Michael Keith, Rosna Mortuza and Helal Abbas all added to the ballot paper. Many local members were disgusted with the thoroughly discredited process that they saw as bent on preventing Lutfur reaching the members’ ballot paper. Many more had hoped that the ballot result would herald an end to the local “special measures” status once and for all.

Signs of members stirring were obvious when Tower Hamlets Borough Labour Party at its General Committee meeting of 22nd July (the last time the GC was able to meet), passed *nem con* an emergency motion of no confidence in the London Labour Party’s conduct of the shortlisting process. At this well attended meeting, delegates expressed their frustration with those handling the process – not a single delegate spoke against the motion which was then sent to the NEC calling for an investigation. No reply or acknowledgement has ever been received.

The members’ ballot finally took place on Saturday 4th September. It should be noted that the ballot of local eligible members was conducted entirely by the officers of the London Labour Party. Ken Clark and Peter May had attended the Executive Committee meeting in May to tell us that in order that there be a robust selection process for Labour’s candidate, they would run it themselves, and no one from or with a connection to Tower Hamlets would influence it. Eligible members were only able to vote in person and had to provide their Labour Party membership card, photo ID and proof of address before being given a ballot paper. This was a great inconvenience to longstanding elderly members many of whom, nevertheless, attended and voted. I, as secretary of the local party, was not allowed to observe the process inside the polling station and was asked to leave by Ken Clark (the London Director) after about an hour (10am ish).

Vote-rigging allegations in the borough – both in internal and external elections – have always been big on claims but very short on proof. Nevertheless, it is somewhat preposterous to imagine that a large number of people were able to procure relevant credentials – including photo ID and fake party cards – and vote in a selection process that was not only scrutinised by experienced London Labour Party officers inside the polling station, but would-be voters approaching the polling station were also watched closely by candidates and their many supporters from outside.

I returned to the polling station about 6pm and talked to members outside while awaiting the opportunity to scrutinise the counting of the ballot due to begin after 8pm – a role that candidates, their campaign managers and Executive Committee members (of which I was one) were allowed to perform. At 8pm I asked Ken Clark – the man in charge – if I could come in. His reply was “Fuck off and stand over there!” I’m no shrinking violet and I recognise that tensions were high, but still I don’t expect to be spoken to by party officials in this manner (which would have been totally unacceptable if it had been directed at a woman comrade). Mr Clark’s comment was witnessed by Labour Group and Executive Committee members.

After three rounds of counting, with Lutfur Rahman clearly well ahead, John Biggs gave notice that he may wish to challenge the selection outcome. After five rounds of preference distribution, Lutfur Rahman, the front runner throughout, reached over 50% of votes cast with two other members still in the ballot. At this point John Biggs, and others, called for the final round of preferences to be distributed to be certain what the winning margin was. Ken Clark refused a further round of preference distribution as a candidate had reached more than 50% of the votes cast. He did ask each person present for their view about the ballot and then declared the ballot result valid and that Lutfur Rahman was the official Labour Party candidate for Mayor of Tower Hamlets. He then lead Lutfur outside the polling station and made a similar statement to the many members waiting there (previously available on YouTube).

The next twist came when Helal Abbas (who would never have even been on the shortlist if it were not for the actions of Lutfur Rahman) presented written complaints to the NEC at some point between 4th and 15th September. His complaint was supported by a statement from Cllr Bill Turner (campaign manager for shortlisted mayoral candidate Shiria Khatun – 29 votes) and cited information provided by Michael Keith (another failed mayoral candidate) and Andrew Gilligan. Why should a *Telegraph* journalist who is not a Labour Party member provide material to assist a member of the shortlist to make a complaint? Why should the Labour Party listen to it?

It should be remembered that those candidates previously short-listed have had the list of eligible members for considerably more time than Lutfur Rahman and they have had ample opportunity to raise any concerns about the eligibility of individual members prior to the ballot – but to my knowledge not one of them, or any of their campaign managers, did so.

Despite Labour Party officers having the bulk of Cllr Abbas’s allegations since 17th September, they did not give Lutfur Rahman notice of them nor chance to refute them before they were tabled at the NEC meeting on 21st September. With not enough time for the NEC to investigate the allegations – which therefore remain unproven – the conspiracy was successful. The NEC turned the members’ vote into “toast”. I understand that the investigation into the allegations will not now be pursued – how convenient for those who conspired to block Lutfur Rahman. So the conspiracy is celebrating, but maybe too soon.

The major consequence of the NEC decision is that the Labour vote will now be divided between the imposed candidate and the local Labour Party members’ choice Lutfur Rahman, who has since been forced by the above events to stand as an independent. As a consequence eight members of the Labour Group have since been expelled along with two officers (of whom I appear to be one, and Jenni Boswell-Jones appears to be the other). Even so I have not yet received any notification from the Labour Party about my expulsion, but instead continue to receive urgent appeals to help the imposed candidate. One further member of the local party has also been expelled: it is unclear exactly who this is, but the witch hunt has begun.

The real situation is that the local party is split from top to bottom. Lutfur Rahman retains a very large reservoir of support among ordinary local party members and activists. After all, 433 of them voted for him – 394 as their first preference! Although eight Labour councillors have been expelled, not all remaining members of the Labour Group are happy. Some have told me that they believe that there has been a conspiracy to cheat Lutfur Rahman of the Labour Party nomination dating back to before the local elections, citing the *Dispatches* programme and Andrew Gilligan's blogs as evidence. Others, who support neither Abbas nor Lutfur, feel that the NEC was bounced into its decision and they now fear for a civil war inside the party and the consequences for their own re-election in due course. Ordinary members are in despair that local democracy will now never be restored to the local party and many activists are on strike or providing excuses for not actively engaging in the campaign for the NEC's imposed candidate.

Yes, it is true that a certain amount of Labour tribalism is on show. Locally elected MPs, some Labour Group members, defeated mayoral candidates and some party members are working for the imposed candidate simply because he has the "official" tag – many after all want to keep their status as Labour councillors or hope to be given the opportunity to gain that status in the future. The national Labour machine has had to resort to calls for help from outside the borough.

Labour Group members, and those who aspire to be so, look upwards to the Labour Party hierarchy as it is from there that Labour local government candidates have been imposed for nearly a decade. Regardless of their talents many members of the current Labour Group would struggle to get selected as candidates if local members had a vote. Among those who aspire are members that wish to see the local progressive forces expelled from the party – in other words faction fighters and witch hunters who refuse to accept the democratic decisions of local members.

I am proud to support Lutfur Rahman for Mayor of Tower Hamlets – for me he is the real Labour Party candidate, chosen by members young and old, black and white, men and women. I have no hesitation in recommending him to all voters in Tower Hamlets. Please **give Lutfur Rahman your first preference vote on Thursday 21st October.**

To Labour supporters thinking of voting for the imposed candidate I appeal to you to think again and if you can't vote Lutfur Rahman on your first preference at least give him your second preference vote.

Finally to Labour Party members disgusted at the manipulation of the local party I call upon you **not** to resign or walk away from Labour. If democratic rights are not restored, the hierarchy will continue to override local members. Stay, continue the fight inside Labour for the return of your full democratic rights – a fight that I hope one day to be able to join you again as a member of the Labour Party.

Regards,

Stephen Beckett

Secretary (apparently expelled)
Tower Hamlets Borough Labour Party

TOWER HAMLETS BOROUGH LABOUR PARTY OMOV BALLOT TO DETERMINE THE LABOUR CANDIDATE FOR THE FIRST DIRECTLY ELECTED MAYOR OF TOWER HAMLETS.

SATURDAY 4th SEPTEMBER 2010
 POLLING TATION: LABOUR PARTY ROOMS
 349 CAMBRIDGE HEATH ROAD E2.

BALLOT ADMINISTERED BY LONDON LABOUR PARTY STAFF

Conditions for voting:

- voting in person only.
- must have Labour Party membership card,
- must have photo ID and
- must have proof of address of eligible member.

No postal or proxy votes were permitted.

ABBAS	117	121 (+4)	123 (+2)	128 (+5)	157 (+29)
BIGGS	182	189 (+7)	201 (+12)	206 (+5)	251 (+45)
ISLAM	33	37 (+4)	40 (+3)	OUT	
KEITH	89	94 (+5)	98 (+4)	100 (+2)	OUT
KHATUN	27	29 (+2)	OUT		
MORTUZA	26	OUT			
RAHMAN	394	397 (+3)	402 (+5)	425 (+23)	433 (+8)
Votes cast Target 50% + 1	868 Target: 435	867 Target: 434	864 Target: 433	859 Target: 430	841 Target: 421
Turnout: 881 out of a possible 1,213 (72.6%).					