

Labour Party Compliance Unit interview with David Hookes, Riverside CLP

10:44 in the Unite building

With Ben Westerman and Andy Smith of regional office of LP

Present also HH and David Hookes

BW: Thanks for coming in, thanks for giving your time and providing a statement

I will talk you through the formalities first. This exercise is fact-finding mission to take some notes on what has been going on in Riverside, where disagreements have arisen and allow people to vocalise the statements they have made, to explain the things etc etc. Once I have conducted those I will review the evidence I will be making a recommendation, which I do not know as yet what it will be, to the NEC disputes panel in January after which we will look to have an AGM. The point of the investigation is to find a way to heal whatever wounds may have arisen, and find a way to make the CLP work together and move forwards in a united way. That's what we are all after - just to clarify things You are a regular attendee?

DH Yes, but I missed the last one

BW And you have been for the last year or so?

DH Yes

BW There have been several claims from all sides of the political spectrum that Riverside CLP isn't working in terms of meetings, how people are feeling about meetings, clearly something is wrong, there seems to be little disagreement about that from all sides of the debate. How do you perceive that? Do you agree or disagree? What would be your view about how things are as it were in the CLP

DH: Although I have been a member for many years I have only been attending for the last year or so (in this CLP). I must say I was a bit surprised at what allowed to go on in the meetings. For instance, as I said in my statement, Cllr Small and others would shout things out while people were trying to make a point. It seemed to me out of order. I had not come across this in my life time in the Labour Party or in the trade union movement. If people started abusing someone in the meeting one would normally expect the chair to call them to order basically, tell them to get control of themselves, something like that that sort of thing going on I found as rather a surprise that nothing was done about. There was certainly from the old hands in the constituency there seemed to be some sort of objection that people moved motions that they were not used to, there seemed to be antagonism that such motions were moved, to give an example, if people put a motion forward as I did on the bombing of Syria, it was amended in such a way that it lost all of its meaning

BW that what you called a wrecking amendment

DH: Yes a wrecking amendment – normally organisations would recognise that for what it is and discourage people from doing it. When this was done to my motion I said that this was a completely different motion – can't we keep its basic meaning with some amendments possible that do not alter the basic meaning. My suggestion was not taken up by the chair and she allowed the wrecking amendment to go ahead and I thought that created some tension in the atmosphere of the meeting. I thought that the response of those who were subject to that , including myself, was very mild in the circumstances- it was clearly something that was acceptable to the leadership of the CLP which I found pretty unfortunate, put it that way.

BW: Just to start from the beginning of the statement, Nick Small, I am obviously aware of the complaints he made, uncomradely behaviour in meetings has nobody else has mentioned Nick Small, I am wondering if you could give an example

DH: I put a query to the MP about here support for bombing Syria, she had previously supported the Iraq war- I will go into that question later- he shouted out in the meeting "antisemitic!" which is very offensive and abusive and I was surprised

BW: Do you recall the question that provoked his response?

DH: We had tried to persuade her not to support bombing in Syria.

My motion was changed to giving her a free hand to act on her conscience whereas my original motion sort to advise her not to support the bombing since it might kill civilians including women and children. Corbyn's approach I thought was correct to suggest that we try to stop the funds and supply of arms to ISIS which they were getting from Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

There were ways of stopping ISIS without causing civilian loss of life.

The question that provoked Small that I asked her was " Have you had second thoughts since there had been reports on the Internet, how reliable they are one cannot be too sure, but there is background support for this, that Israel had links with ISIS. If it were true then the British might be bombing Israeli troops who were somehow engaged on the side of ISIS. There is a UN report of Israel supplying medical aid to Al-Nusra, which is essentially very similar to ISIS and they were criticised by the UN for doing that, and there is evidence backing all this up, as I asked her had she had second thoughts about bombing as it might end up bombing Israeli soldiers. That was seen by Small as an outrageous suggestion maybe he is politically ignorant about what really goes on in the world, I don't know. To him it was utterly outrageous that I should suggest something of that nature about Israel. I was surprised that he was not reprimanded and told to behave himself but he wasn't and several others made similar interventions.

I should say in that meeting there was a very clear statement by Louise Ellman, which I mention in my statement, that criticism of Israel was not the same as antisemitism, Yet it would appear that she used critical remarks of Israel as a basis of charges of antisemitism. It is unclear who actually made charges of antisemitism, certainly Small has made charges, but she has clearly contradicted herself by supporting charges of antisemitism based on criticisms of Israel. I found the response in the meeting. I had read documents from the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) about ISIS and its links with Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. I was not talking completely off the top of my head, making wild allegations.

BW: OK just a few

DH: Nick Small subsequently tweeted about this but did not actually name anybody in the tweet but he has done so in discussion- he went to the Jewish Chronicle, a TV station and may be the local ECHO at some point. This uncomradely behaviour, to put it mildly there is no basis. He has actually told at least two people separately that he knows that the people concerned, that is myself Helen, and Linda, that he knows that we are not actually anti-Semites

BW: I would like to ask about that who he has alleged to have told that to

DH: One person is Chris Jones an experienced trade unionist

BW He is a member in Riverside?

DH: Yes He told him-I have got this second hand-I was told that he made this remark. Another person is John Davies-who you are interviewing later today- or at least somebody told him that Small said "I know these people are not anti-Semites but if they would withdraw their comments about Israel I will let the matter drop" To me that is frankly outrageous If he as he appears to have been doing making charges of antisemitism then that is a serious, serious charge and very defamatory. And yet he was doing it for opportunist political reasons trying to denigrate the supporters of Jeremy Corbyn. At least, at least it is being disrespectful using spurious charges of antisemitism, that is being disrespectful of the many millions of real victims of real antisemitism- he is using what happened to them in a politically opportunist way, that is being disrespectful, one could use stronger language but I will leave it at that.

BW: Lets come back to these things shortly. Just away from the charge of antisemitism. The nature of the meetings. It has been described variously as a 'toxic atmosphere', 'frightful', 'deeply unpleasant', 'scary', 'somebody being reduced to tears'. One would like to get to the bottom of this, no-one would wish this on anybody why is this coming from, why are people having these reactions

DH: I personally did have any of those reactions even though...There was some intimidation or unpleasantness from one particular person who was shouting out

BW: Who was that?

DH: That was Nick Small- people were staggered at the conduct of the meeting -what was interpreted as unpleasantness was the lack of order in the conduct of the meeting. Sometimes the meeting would start 10-15 mins late but the chair would finish it on the dot of 9:00pm

BW: Why was it started late?

DH: I don't know! Perhaps it was to reduce the time for motions ,- I've no idea whether that was deliberate or not, malicious but I think it was more out of incompetence than any thing else. I don't recognise that every meeting was full of this toxic atmosphere, that's complete nonsense . I suppose the old guard if we can call them that, were used to having small meetings, 10-15 or 20 at the most. But the meeting had now 60-70 people with people wishing to express their political opinions- that's what political meetings are for after all. I think what was happening was that suddenly they had people asking questions

DH That's a kind way of putting it

BW: The point of me asking questions is to anticipate arguments The lateness of starting meetings, the numbers rising dramatically they were not used to signing in so many members?

DH: Yes that's a possible explanation- I remember that everyone seemed to be in but the meeting did not start – I don't know why

DH: In one particular meeting, I think it was 1 July meeting there were motions from St Michaels ward to support Corbyn's nomination.The chair announced that she was not taking any motions because she was not sure how many people in the room were members of the Labour Party. She could have found that out one way or the other. She said she was abandoning any agenda

BW: What was the reaction in the room?

DH: It was pretty amazed – a flimsy reason had been given to turn the meeting into a discussion group meeting not a proper CLP meeting

BW: Could you see that was reasonable if she could not be sure of membership if votes were taken

DH: Someone asked “how many people are not members of the Labour Party- two people put there hands up. They could have been identified if they were not on the list and told not to vote- even asked to leave if necessary. When she abandoned the agenda somebody moved a motion of no confidence in the chair which is the right of any meeting to do because of this extraordinary behaviour. They did not appoint tellers-they then got the vice-chair of the CLP to come out to the front to do the counting. In my view with a serious motion you must appoint tellers at least two. Those for the motion, that is have no confidence in the chair. I noted on my watch how long it took him to count the votes, In a crowded meeting it is often quite difficult to count votes in such a meeting eventually he counted how many there were and he came up with a number of 67. It took him a few minutes it was not easy to do that. He then asked for the number against the motion. To any observer the number against was less than those for but not enormously so- he counted them extremely quickly roughly half the time he took to count the votes ‘for’. He said the answer was 68, that is one more although he took half the time to count it. My reckoning is he pulled that number out of the air- he invented it- why would it be 68 just one more. It would have required a 2/3 majority to win that motion and I do not think we had that .But we certainly had a lot more than this. I think that was pretty disrespectful of the members and disreputable behaviour. I cannot prove this-but just using common sense and looking at the time on your watch you know he did not do a proper count. Certainly we were in a majority but not a 2/3 majority.

BW: OK moving on- you mention ‘bigoted behaviour’ against Jeremy Corbyn’s policies. Was that just Nick Small or were there others

DH: There were people shouting out things for instance when someone moved the motion of no confidence in the chair this women shouted out (I don’t know her name) “ You are always causing trouble, you are” she was referring to John Davies the person who moved the vote of no confidence. That behaviour seemed to me to show that she had a bigoted view of him as a person. These wrecking amendments indicated a bigoted attitude, that we were not allowed to express our political views, that they had to got rid of and not put to the meeting.

BW: OK thank you . Coming back to this comment about Israel and ISIS, do you see that this might be deemed offensive to link Israel to a terrorist organisation, you also mentioned Hamas as well. Regardless of the politics of the Region can you see somebody might be offended by that?

DH: I can see that might come as a shock

BW: ...that they would be offended?

DH; I would say offended out of ignorance and a lack of political understanding they might be offended someone who does not know some details about what is going on in the world might...

BW: You yourself said you are not entirely sure of the veracity of the reports you got on line.

DH: I also knew – Ok I will tell you what I know: I read a US Defence Intelligence Agency which was heavily redacted -you can get it on the internet it was published in 2012, and in it it says quite clearly that Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia were planning to set up a Caliphate in Eastern Syria OK. The document had some problems with that it might spill over into Iraq, which it eventually did, and there might be some problems there. The real politique of the situation is that Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, cannot carry out such an operation without the support of the major power in the region, that is the USA and its supporters, UK, France, and certainly Israel as well.

BW: You have mentioned Israel as a US proxy

DH: ..acting as a proxy that is in another instance

BW: It's on line I cannot judge its status

DH: It is generally accepted as genuine document understand if they

BW: can you see that saying Israel is acting as a US proxy could be offensive?

DH: I can understand if they had a false view of Israel's role they might be offended they could not imagine that Israel could do these things- Israel is involved in some very dubious things going on in the world -in the book called "War against the people" I have read about this is by Jeff Halper, and Israeli, it gives a detailed account of why as he puts it, "how Israel gets away with things" he is trying to explain this

BW: irrespective of the level of ignorance can you understand Nick Small' reaction.?

DH: I do not think for a moment that Nick Small thought that that was an antisemitic statement. He later admitted to several people as much...It was a case of political opportunism, stirring things up etc, that's what was going on. But I can imagine that people who have a rosy view about what Israel does in the world might be offended. If the mainstream narrative is contradicted by facts then that could be very disconcerting. When I was a kid my parents told me that God had blessed America because more people went to church. It was only some time later at the time of the Vietnam war I learnt something different, It was a great shock to realise that everything I had heard from my parents about the USA was completely wrong. So I can understand how people can be upset and offended when they hear that their beliefs are wrong

I did talk to Louise Ellman in Parliament I was lobbying here about Palestine. I did raise the matter of Israel helping apartheid South Africa to develop nuclear weapons. She showed some surprise that I was aware of this fact, and secondly she said she disagreed with Israel's action in this instance,

BW: when the issue of Palestine comes up in the CLP after Ellman has given her report

DH: or there is a motion

BW: when her report is given and she mentions the Middle East crisis

DH: She mentions the Middle East but she does not mention Palestine

BW: Where in the meeting is the matter arising? There is no doubt that the matter is a contentious one throughout the world what I am getting at where in the meeting is it being brought up?

DH: Well people will ask her questions- may be they have noted her remarks in Parliament about digging tunnels, someone in the CLP made a comparison of people digging tunnels in Gaza to bring in food and probably weapons with people digging tunnels in the Warsaw Ghetto

BW: How did you feel about that?

DH: I was not present when this comparison was made but I understand that there was this question put to Ellman. I can understand that could be a disturbing comparison but may be true one even though disturbing- things that are disturbing can often be true.

BW: Ok When you say that she is opposed to Labour Party policy what are you exactly referring to there?

DH: I believe she supported the last Israel invasion of Gaza but I remember Ed Miliband who was the leader saying that the Labour Party did not support the invasion of Gaza would be one instance.

BW: OK thank you for that. I have two more questions: as I said before when I play devil's advocate I wish to get to the issue. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'Zionism' as a movement to protect the Jewish nation which is now Israel Do you think that a Jewish person would be offended to hear Zionism as a danger to the Jewish people? or as a negation of the principles of Judaism itself?

DH: they may have that reaction but after discussion and reading the authors mentioned they may change their mind. Zionism before the holocaust was relatively unpopular amongst Jewish people. Where it was strong was in Czarist Russia

BW: what about those Jews who describe themselves as Zionist who support the right of Israel to exist? That to describe Zionism as a danger to the Jewish people could be deeply offensive to them.

DH: It may be but clearly there is room in the Middle East for a single secular state for Arabs and Jews and other groups with different confessions and different so called ethnic origins to live together in a land which we can call Palestine

BW: I am not here to argue about the state.

DH: It is dangerous to the Jewish people to surround themselves with enemies. It is a perfectly reasonable position to say..

BW: Don't you see that Jewish person who calls themselves a Zionist would be offended when told the Zionism is a danger to them some would say that...

DH: obviously I can understand that Jewish people might see the Zionist state as a form of protection - especially if there was an upsurge of antisemitism and fascism which is not completely zero at the moment. They might feel they can go to Israel which has an army to protect them.