

Labour Party

A stitch-up in time for Euro poll 2014

Many able hopefuls have been excluded from European selections. Why? asks Anita Pollack

It pains me, as a long-time Labour Party and trade union member, that there has been a massive stitch-up of the selection process for next year's European Parliament elections. From region after region, party members in blogs, tweets, letters and resolutions are complaining about high-flying candidates being discarded without so much as an interview to ensure a clear run for pre-selected union favourites.

For the first time in 15 years, Labour is hoping to win some European parliamentary seats in 2014 to provide a new spark to its tiny team of hard-working MEPs. It should be a cause for celebration.

I can only speak for London, where at least three highly qualified candidates were not even offered the courtesy of an interview.

The dynamic Carole Tongue, a Labour MEP from 1984 to 1999 and a former deputy leader, an outstanding advocate for trade unions, was blocked. Anne Fairweather, a popular candidate at the top of the list in 2009, fared similarly. Labour councillor Sally Prentice, with European expertise, was also blocked. With credentials such as these, it would have been very difficult for an interview panel to deny them a place – which is why they were stopped before they could get that far. Yes, a huge number of potential candidates applied, but many of these are people who simply want to go on a Labour list so as to put down a marker for future parliamentary selections.

I have written to Labour general secretary Iain McNichol to express astonishment at the London shortlist, but have not yet had a reply. We need MEPs who want to be in that job and to work hard. It would have made for a very exciting hustings round in London had such a high-quality bunch been allowed into the contest. This could only be good, as it would raise Labour members' knowledge of the EU and the work done by MEPs.

Similar stories these have surfaced in a number of regions. In the West Midlands, another former Labour MEP, David Hallam, was not offered an interview. In the North East region, some senior party members have resigned because of the exclusion of



Being an MEP is hard work, not a sinecure

well-regarded candidates.

It is clear that the GMB and Unite unions have an agreed slate and ensured there would be little effective opposition. It simply is not good enough. Surely we should have left these Stalinist days behind? Why have the unions decided to do this? It is not as though Labour MEPs have not been supportive of the unions' cause in the past.

We cannot suppose that the party is officially against "re-runs", since three former MEPs have made it as far as the lists: Glyn Ford in the South West region, Richard Corbett in Yorkshire and Humber and Neena Gill in the West Midlands. But if they made it, why not Carole Tongue or David Hallam?

There have been letters to regional directors and the party general secretary, with stonewalling responses refusing to list criteria. We have been told that the selections were a "political decision". That's clear – very political.

The unions are ensuring their placepersons dominate the new MEP intake. But what is the agenda beyond that? What are they seeking to achieve in the European Parliament that Labour MEPs are not currently working towards?

Or is it simply to reward some people with what they feel is a cushy job? (I can tell them from experience that they will have to work extremely hard when they get there.)

They should come clean.

Since the chances of a re-run are slim, we can only hope to organise for better procedures in the future. It would be useful for people to put their ideas on this forward to regional parties and Labour's National Executive Committee. Here are some thoughts. Criteria for long and shortlisting should be published. Before that, how can we ensure that selection boards are themselves selected with much more objective care?

It's all very well the party saying that there are three union representatives and three constituency ones and one from the NEC. What about the socialist societies? No care appears to be taken to ensure that the CLP representatives are not union stooges in disguise.

We should also ask whether the lists put to members should really be confined to the number of places on a regional list for the election, with one or, at most two, others for substitutes. Perhaps party members could choose from up to twice that number, with an eliminating ballot to achieve the list. Whatever is done, we can't allow this sort of debacle to continue.

Is Labour's NEC listening?

*Anita Pollack is the author of *Wreckers or Builders? A History of Labour Members of the European Parliament 1979-99*. She was a Labour MEP from 1989 to 1999*