

17th November 2016, *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/92ea4092-acb6-11e6-9cb3-bb8207902122>

Labour engulfed in ground war as unions reinforce rebel MPs

Obscure device in rule book used to influence membership deselection ballots

November 17, 2016

[Jim Pickard](#), Chief Political Correspondent

A ground war has broken out in the [Labour party](#) as unions try to shore up support for rebel MPs under attack from Jeremy Corbyn and his allies.

Unions such as Usdaw and Community, as well as the Co-operative party, are setting up local branches in the constituencies of MPs who are at risk of deselection by [Mr Corbyn](#). Under an obscure device in Labour's rule book, a union branch with just one member carries the same weight in a membership ballot for deselection as a party branch with hundreds of members.

The move comes after months of bitter infighting, culminating in a leadership challenge that failed in September to depose Mr Corbyn.

During the war of words over the leadership, Mr Corbyn's allies warned rebels that they would be "held to account" afterwards. Mr Corbyn himself said many MPs could face reselection because of proposed changes to constituency boundaries, although he added that the "vast majority" had nothing to fear.

"We've had the first phase of the war, the battle for the leadership," said one senior party figure. "This is what you might call close combat, street-by-street fighting for the soul of the party."

After months of activity some constituencies now have more union branches than party branches, giving the unions disproportionate power over the future of the local MP. "Let's say you have 10 branches and then you get five new Usdaw branches in the constituency," said one Labour figure. "It means that to deselect your MP you need eight branches [to get a majority] instead of six."

In September, Mr Corbyn's campaign team [accidentally released a list of 14 Labour MPs](#) seen as enemies of the leader. They included his deputy Tom Watson, John Woodcock, Ben Bradshaw, Frank Field, Anna Turley, Jess Phillips and Owen Smith, who stood unsuccessfully for the leadership last summer.

Paul Mason, a former journalist who is one of Mr Corbyn's most vocal supporters, recently called for the deselection of Ms Turley. That prompted John Paul McHugh, deputy general

secretary of the steel union Community, to warn: “If Paul Mason or anyone else comes for the deselection of Anna Turley, I’ll be standing beside her.”

Ms Turley is also vice-chair of the Co-operative party, which is affiliated to Labour. Twenty-six MPs are members of both parties.

John Hannett, general secretary of Usdaw, has also publicly warned against deselections. “Threatening to deselect, effectively sack, Labour MPs for simply articulating their honestly held beliefs is not in the ‘broad church’ tradition,” he said.

As well as using their local branches to prevent trigger ballots for deselection, moderate unions can also thwart what Mr Corbyn has called a “[full and open reselection process](#)” after the 2018 constituency boundary changes, which will redraw the political map of Britain.

When a seat is split in two by those changes, affiliated groups such as unions can vote for a straight run-off between the two local MPs affected, thus preventing an open contest against new candidates.

But with the unions now split between pro-Corbyn and anti-Corbyn factions, more leftwing unions are also expected to step up their affiliation efforts, setting the stage for a proxy war.

Unite has consistently supported Mr Corbyn. Its leader Len McCluskey has called for rebel MPs to be “held to account” for challenging him during the summer. The union is widely expected to increase its local affiliations, although it told the FT it had no such plans.

On Thursday, Usdaw said it had encouraged branches to affiliate to local constituency Labour parties “for decades” to maintain the historic link between Labour and the unions. “The decision to affiliate to a [constituency party] is up to each branch and we welcome when they recognise the importance of establishing this local link.”

But the creation of affiliates has suddenly become a priority. “The situation in the party makes these things all the more important,” said one.

Labour’s national executive committee will hold a meeting next week to discuss rule changes designed to bolster Mr Corbyn’s position as the leader. The talks could include allowing more grassroots supporters — most of whom are leftwing after a surge of new members enthused by Mr Corbyn — on to the NEC. Mr Corbyn’s allies may also try to lower the support threshold for candidates to get on to future leadership ballots from 15 per cent of Labour MPs to 5 per cent, making it easier for a hard left candidate to succeed him.

“Unless they change the 15 per cent threshold then Jeremy is going to struggle to engineer a smooth succession to a like-minded replacement,” said one MP.