

LOCKING OUT THE LEFT FOR GOOD?

LABOUR CONFERENCE 2021

TWO YEARS ago, when Labour last held an in-person conference, how different the scene was. Not only was Jeremy Corbyn still leader, but the party had over a hundred thousand more members than remain today. Constituency members and union delegations were overwhelmingly from the left. As a result, conference voted for free movement, a radical break from Labour's record of supporting immigration controls. In addition, it passed a resolution supporting Palestinian rights and supporting BDS demands.

Now, Jeremy Corbyn has been suspended from the Parliamentary Party, members are leaving in droves, many others have been suspended or expelled with no right to defend themselves – including Jewish supporters of Palestinians rights charged with anti-Semitism.

Eleven prominent members of Jewish Voices for Labour are facing expulsion for daring to criticise the purge of pro-Palestine members. And to prevent members seeking legal redress against unlawful disciplinary measures, new rules proposed by Starmer/Evans would impose Labour's costs on members who unsuccessfully took it to court.

There are reports from across the country of gross violations of the rule book by regional officers attempting to prevent left wingers' election as conference delegates. Such wholesale gerrymandering exceeds even the worst excesses of the 1950s or the 1980s. An echo of those days, too, is the de facto restoration of the bans and proscriptions of organisations, this time centring on Socialist Appeal who, unlike their forbear militant, pose no real danger to the Labour Right. But their proscription serves as a threat to other left organisations.

The Grand Inquisitor

At the top of this party Inquisition sits former Blair aide David Evans, acting general secretary. He intends to spring on Annual Conference a

series of constitutional "reforms", not notified in advance let alone discussed by the membership that give him near absolute powers. One seeks to impose a "probationary period of provisional membership during which applications can be "rejected for any reason which the general secretary sees fit."

A bigger news item is Starmer's proposal to end the "one member one vote" system that saw Corbyn elected by hundreds of thousands of members and TU union affiliated supporters. Though this measure was originally designed to dilute the constituency activists with a supposedly passive mass of right-leaning voters, it backfired badly in 2015 and 2016. Now the right see a return to the electoral college as a way to increase the power of the PLP, but hold on to the unions' money.

Unite's general secretary Sharon Graham, though she was elected on a platform of less involvement in Party affairs, has denounced the proposal to ditch OMOV as, "unfair, undemocratic and a backwards step for our party." But she also announced she would not be attending Conference. Unite has since 2019 been steadily reducing its donations to the Party and the Bakers and Fire Brigades unions have threatened to discuss disaffiliation if the witch hunts continue. It is of course possible that Starmer might back down on OMOV (referring it to a special conference) and is in fact concentrating on getting Evans elected as general secretary.

Starmer's strategic goal is - as The Independent suggests - to "lock the party's left wing out of power for good." Evans constitutional amendments - 83 pages of them - are to be put to the NEC on Friday, only a day before the conference vote. If Evans and his carte blanche powers are endorsed, he will continue and complete the purge.

Thus the first day of the conference could well be decisive for the very

future of the party, let alone the left within it. If Starmer and Evans get their way, tens, even hundreds of thousands more, will leave the Labour Party and it will cease to be a useful organisation for activists of any sort. Union militants and left activists will have once again to consider building, at the very least, a united front for intervention in the class struggles coming in the years ahead.

What is to be done?

Workers Power supporters have argued repeatedly that faced with all this it is no use keeping one's head down in the hope of better days to come. The last period of such waiting lasted thirty years. It is far from certain that Labour can survive that as any sort of party of the working class or trade unions.

Last but not least, the hundreds of thousands of leftists still in the party and those now outside it, in the affiliated unions too, need to ask themselves hard questions. Why did Corbynism fail to get beyond its highpoint of 2017? Why, faced with the sabotage and slanders of the right, did Jeremy repeatedly turn the other cheek? Why, less nobly, did he leave his supporters to be persecuted? Why did defeat at the polls in 2019 result in such a rapid and total collapse of the Corbyn Movement? Why has the resistance to Starmer been so fragmented and dispirited? Why did the Socialist Campaign Group and Momentum fail to coordinate resistance? As a consequence of this total failure of leadership various small resistance groups have formed but have proved unable to unite.

The fundamental answer to all these questions lies not in the muddle-headedness or lack of courage of the "leaders" who initially showed determination and moral courage faced with vile slanders from their colleagues on the Labour benches. Rather, as the elections approached, they revealed the hopeless contradictions of left reformism centred

on winning elections at all costs and holding together the Labour "Broad Church". But, as we have seen, the Labour right has no such commitment to this "left and right wings are needed to fly" nonsense.

Indeed, the right only finds the left tolerable to the extent that it is tiny, ineffective and keeps its mouth shut. The Labour left only survived the Blair years because he and Mandelson were unable to attract a enough billionaire to dispense with the trade unions and their financing. The only power within the party independent of the right's dictatorship remains those sections of the trade union bureaucracy unwilling to hand over "their" party to people toadying to the bosses at every turn.

Corbyn and McDonnell's dependence on the right explains why they would not allow the members to de-select right wing MPs and councillors, despite their open sabotage of Labour's chances in 2017 and 2019. It explains why they did not carry out constitutional changes that would have made the present bureaucratic dictatorship impossible, putting policy, conference and the regional apparatus under the control of the rank and file.

The trouble is that most of the left see no alternative to Corbynism, just as the older amongst them saw no alternative to Bennism in the mid-eighties and tried time and again to galvanise its corpse. Both movements saw and see parliamentarism and winning elections as the only road to what they regard as socialism. They do not see the class struggle, in the workplaces, in the communities and the streets as the party's prime arena - at best it is an auxiliary to the electoral contests. But socialism will not come through parliament - only a revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist class will open the road to building socialism, saving the planet, ending racism, liberating women, ending the threat of imperialist wars.

WE NEED A REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE TO STOP CLIMATE CHANGE

IF ANY year should have settled the debate on climate change, 2021 should be it. Extreme weather events around the globe included wildfires raging out of control in Canada and the USA, in Greece and Australia; Hurricane Ida hitting New York, killing 42 people, many in basement flats; catastrophic floods in Henan in China and in the Ahr Valley in western Germany. The list could go on and on.

For the world's leaders who will gather at COP26 in Glasgow from 1-16 November, the "debate" has shifted, a fact symbolised by the exit of the Denier in Chief Donald Trump and his replacement by Joe Biden and the Democrats' environmentalist icon John Kerry.

Their host Boris Johnson has, it seems, undergone a Damascene conversion on the road to Glasgow. In a 2015 article in the Daily Telegraph, he said that year's severe winter weather had nothing to do with climate change and mocked the Paris COP Agreement:

"I am sure that those global leaders were driven by a primitive fear that the present ambient warm weather is somehow caused by humanity; and that fear – as far as I understand the science – is equally without foundation. There may be all kinds of reasons why I was sweating at ping-pong [in December] – but they don't include global warm-

ing."

As late as 2019, he voted against a motion calling on the government to bring forward "a green industrial revolution to decarbonise the economy and boost economic growth." Yet by November 2020, he was announcing his own Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution.

In April this year, the government's sixth Carbon Budget included a target to "slash emissions" by 28% by 2035, and that it would be enshrined in law. But the rhetoric does not match reality. A recent study by the Green Alliance think tank showed that the government will meet less than a quarter of its emission reductions. Worldwide we are currently set for temperature rises of 2.7-3C, despite 30 years of dire warnings from scientists and 6 years passing since the Paris Accords aimed to keep temperatures ideally at 1.5C.

In fact, not only are the Tories dragging their feet on shutting down current fossil fuel extraction; they are making plans to open up new oil fields off the west coast of the Shetland Islands and building new coal mines in Cumbria. Anything to further enrich the oil companies and gain strategic advantages over their rivals in the EU and further afield.

As a result of the mounting number of droughts, wildfires, floods and hurricanes, governments

have joined in the hand wringing and dire warnings about Climate Catastrophe. This is in part a tribute to the actions of movements like Friday's for Future and Extinction Rebellion. But protests and calls on governments and big business to "listen to the scientists" will never be enough. Neither will the creation of XR's Citizens' Assemblies, parallel to government, to come up with a plan demand the latter enforces, prove to be any more than an empty utopia.

Of course the response of governments in practical terms has been woefully inadequate. As a result it is no surprise that a new study shows that 56% of young people across the world think that humanity is doomed and that capitalism is incapable of making a just transition in the time frame necessary.

The millions of mainly young protesters who, in an international movement of unprecedented scale, have been organising school walkouts and direct action, show that we do not have to accept the criminal negligence that has been on offer from the politicians of the ruling class so far. On the 6th of November there will be actions in Glasgow and coordinated protests across the world.

The vacillation by the governments of the world over the past three decades is even more criminal given the relative simplicity

of the solution – stop burning fossil fuels. But this has proven to be impossible so far and no party is willing to challenge the profit motive of capitalism and do what is necessary: expropriate the fossil fuel companies with no compensation, redeploy and retrain their engineers, scientists and experts into the project of transforming the economy.

Only a rapid and radical transformation of the economy can now divert humanity from its disastrous path. This requires nothing short than the seizure of power by the working class and the democratic utilisation of society's resources to make a transformation that not only averts climate disaster but also improves the lives of working people in the process.

For this reason the trade union and socialist movement urgently needs to actively take up the struggle against all the companies and governments adding to the rising danger, to name capitalism as the enemy, to exercise workers' and service users' control over the key parts of the economy, expropriating and reorienting the industries and transport systems responsible. In the process we can identify the obstacles, combat the illusions in a green capitalism, and, most importantly, win people over to the solution – workers' revolution and socialism.

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