

Brighton conference: The political shipwreck of New Labour

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The physical ejection from the Labour Party conference of 82-year-old Walter Wolfgang, a party member for 57 years who fled Germany in order to escape the Nazis, testifies to the anti-democratic agenda of a government determined to quash all opposition to its war-mongering and right-wing economic and social policies.

Wolfgang's crime was to shout "Nonsense!" when Foreign Secretary Jack Straw was defending the Iraq war. For this he was manhandled out of his seat by several burly stewards. Later he was prevented from re-entering the conference by police, who cited the provisions of the government's anti-terrorist legislation.

Labour's actions have about them an air of political desperation. The party leadership faces little internal opposition, or opposition from the leaders of the trade unions affiliated to it. Yet, like the emperor without clothes, it panics when a lone voice of an elderly man challenges its lies and deceptions justifying war.

It was fear of the exposure of the extent of the crisis facing the Labour Party beneath its triumphalist rhetoric that fueled widespread media condemnation of Wolfgang's treatment as a public relations disaster for Blair. Indeed, the incident became a focus for more general warnings that the Labour Party is politically out of touch, socially isolated and organisationally moribund.

The most significant of such comments come from those, such as the *Guardian*, more generally preoccupied with defending the Blair government.

It editorialised on September 26, "This shrunken party also has a shrunken appeal these days. On May 5 just 9.5 million people voted Labour, 4 million down on 1997. In the modern era Labour has only once polled fewer votes than it polled this year, and that was in 1983, an election in which Labour came close to extinction."

Former Labour government adviser David Clark wrote in the same paper three days later: "The Labour Party is in urgent need of renewal and that can't happen until Blair has gone. The party that met in Brighton is visibly exhausted. More than a third of constituencies failed to send a delegate and the ones that did turn up seemed lost and demoralised. Membership is below 200,000 and falling, and the base that is left is ageing and largely inactive. Labour is in a state of incipient organisational collapse. With Blair still in charge, next year's local elections threaten the sort of wipeout that would leave Labour effectively moribund in large parts of the country."

He concluded by warning that Blair's "political legacy will prove as poisonous for Labour as Thatcher's was for the Conservatives."

On September 30, Polly Toynbee wrote that Wolfgang's expulsion "perfectly embodied a weak and depleted party that was not even able to debate the war it had been dragged into... Election campaign reports reveal a party hollowed-out, often a near empty shell where even 'activists' remain angrily inactive at home."

One might ask—why the surprise, shock and indignation? After all, this is a party that has been in power since 1997, during which time it has

carried out all manner of unpardonable crimes. Labour has taken part in three major wars. In the name of combating terrorism it has passed legislation abrogating fundamental democratic rights. It has proceeded with the systematic dismantling of welfare provisions on which millions depend. And it has worked to enrich big business at the direct expense of working people.

Two months before the Labour conference, an innocent Brazilian man, Jean Charles de Menezes, was gunned down under the provisions of a shoot-to-kill policy secretly introduced two years before. The same day that Wolfgang was ejected, the de Menezes family was in London seeking to expose a police cover-up of the crime.

The killing of de Menezes was itself the outcome of the Blair government's criminal decision to join the US-led war against Iraq—a war prepared and commissioned on the basis of lies, waged in defiance of the popular will and accompanied by an onslaught against civil liberties.

Neither the Iraq war nor de Menezes' murder featured at the conference, because neither the constituency parties nor the trade unions considered these the most important issues of debate. This is not because the Labour Party has suddenly become a shell, as Toynbee asserts. Rather, the antecedents of Blair's "New Labour" project are to be found in more than two decades in which the party broke with its old reformist policies and, with the help of the trade union bureaucracy, inflicted one defeat after another on the working class and conducted a major witch-hunt against socialists.

It is through these means that Labour was "hollowed out" and transformed into the ideal vehicle through which to advance a political agenda shaped exclusively by the interests of a financial oligarchy.

This is what Blair was referring to when he told conference that New Labour's great success had been in "disentangling ends and means"—the divorcing of the party from any political or social connection with the working class.

Blair's latter day critics were the cheerleaders for this process. They are worried now because it is New Labour that is being discredited, threatening the party's ability to continue implementing policies that have enriched the privileged social layers whose views they articulate.

Toynbee poignantly entitled her September 30 article, "This Strangulation of Dreams is Creating a Phantom Party."

Exactly what dreams were strangled at Brighton? Both Toynbee and Clark are supporters of Chancellor Gordon Brown. Their "dream" was that this year's conference would be the occasion for Blair to announce a date for his retirement—sooner rather than later—so that Brown could take over.

They know that Labour has lost the support of its working class electorate and can no longer rely on the swing voters in the more middle class constituency it won in 1997. Not only do these layers feel increasingly financially insecure, but many of them are politically opposed to the Iraq war and have broken with the government because of it. It is this coincidence of growing social hardship, anti-war sentiment and

concern over the systematic attacks on democratic rights that threatens the government.

The fears articulated by the *Guardian* are fuelled by growing evidence of a leftward shift within the working class internationally. Three events are of particular significance—New Orleans, the federal elections in Germany, and mounting opposition to the British occupation of Basra, southern Iraq.

At the start of September, the British media looked on in horror at the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The economic and political model they, along with Blair, had held up as an example to follow was utterly discredited by the indifference of the Bush administration to the suffering of the poor. Their primary concern was that this would generate social and political instability within the US, with inevitable repercussions within Britain.

There followed the decisive rejection of the right-wing nostrums advocated by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in Germany's September 18 elections. This was against the express desire of the entire British media for a victory for CDU leader Angela Merkel, not least because they hoped it would strengthen the Bush-Blair axis in Europe.

Just one day later, Basra erupted, following the capture of two Special Air Service officers involved in a covert operation. The sight of hundreds of Iraqis in pitched battles with the British army cut through the claims of popular support for Iraq's new "democracy" and showed how hated Britain's occupation has become.

Clark pointedly warned in his comment, "If the inconclusive German elections were conclusive on one point it was that Europe's largest country doesn't want Blairism.

"On Iraq Blair is not simply discredited: his personal pride has become a fundamental obstacle to any rational discussion about what now needs to happen."

Gordon Brown has been constantly promoted as someone with closer connections to the old labour movement, more in tune with working people and less directly associated with the Iraq war. The hope of many of Labour's apologists is that his becoming leader will provide the party with a "clean shirt" while it continues with essentially the same policies.

However, even before Labour shot itself in the foot with its treatment of Wolfgang, such hopes had already come to nothing.

In his speech to conference, Brown proved that no amount of spin can wash Labour whiter than white. Its agenda is set by the major corporations and investors and cannot be given a popular veneer. Instead, Brown's speech was an affirmation of Blairite orthodoxy—summed up in his Thatcherite commitment to a "home-owning, share-owning democracy."

There would be no return "to the old days of inflationary pay rises and conflict, the old days of putting sectional interests ahead of the national interest, and we will and must continue to pursue what we promised in our manifesto: stability in economic management, stability in industry policy, stability in industrial relations, and stability in the public finances and in our demand for efficiency and value for money."

This meant retaining anti-union laws and further privatizations, with "the private sector as partners for the public interest."

The Brownites' fallback position was that this paean to New Labourism would at least ensure an orderly transition to power. But it only convinced Blair of his rival's weakness. The prime minister's own speech made clear his intention to stay in office until at least the eve of the next election. There would be no "step back" either in Iraq or domestically. Rather, ever more savage attacks would be waged on social conditions in order to compete with China, India, Vietnam and Thailand, which "have labour costs a fraction of ours."

"Every time I've ever introduced a reform in government, I wish in retrospect I had gone further," Blair declared.

When Blair declares that there can be no step back from New Labour's right-wing course, he is translating into the language of sound bites the

essential demands of big business. He insists that there can be no letup in the attacks on the living standards and democratic rights of working people because that is what capitalism demands.

But he is also correct in another sense. There is no possibility of a return to old-style Labour reformism and no possibility of resurrecting the political corpse of the Labour Party.

New Labour is the organizational embodiment of the dictatorship of a fabulously wealthy elite over all aspects of political life. The party's decline is a function of a deliberate and sustained attempt to disenfranchise the working class, which has provided the political basis for an unprecedented growth of social inequality.

It is the very success of the New Labour project that has led to its political shipwreck. The mass of the population cannot be reconciled with policies based on their systematic impoverishment, yet no other course is acceptable as far as Labour's corporate backers are concerned.

The absence of significant opposition to Blair's right-wing course within Labour demonstrates that the party's degeneration is not simply the product of misleadership. It is rooted in the failure of Labour's old perspective, which sought to ameliorate class antagonisms based on various forms of national economic regulation.

The global integration of all aspects of production, distribution and exchange and the unprecedented international mobility of capital dictate to every capitalist government that it constantly lower wages, step up exploitation and slash taxes in order to attract investment and remain competitive. The old national organizations of the labour movement, which accept the inviolability of the profit system, translate this into policy imperatives that they insist cannot be flouted.

This poses a grave threat to working people. There will be no let-up in the destruction of jobs and the constant demand for wage cuts and speedup, further military adventures like Iraq and ever more repressive legislation at home.

No section of the Labour Party or the trade union hierarchy will oppose the government's agenda. An entirely different leadership is required.

The millions who until now have been denied political representation have thus far expressed their dissatisfaction and alienation by deserting their old party. But working people need a new party that defends their independent class interests. It is just as much an objective necessity at the beginning of the 21st century as it was when Labour was founded a century ago.

A party of a qualitatively different type is required, one based on the programme of socialist internationalism. Its ends must be the replacement of private ownership of the means of production and overcoming the division of the world into antagonistic nation states. Its means must be the political and organizational unification of the international working class. This is the political perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party.



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