The crisis of British Labour

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Factional infighting within the Labour government reached stalemate Monday after a group of rebels, whose challenge had been encouraged by the media, failed in their attempts to force Prime Minister Gordon Brown to stand down as party leader.

Brown was able to defy his opponents at a specially convened meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party on Monday evening. He did so primarily by threatening MPs (members of Parliament) with the prospect of an early election having to be called if he was deposed.

Though this is not required constitutionally, Brown's replacement would find it extremely difficult to avoid a general election. Brown became an unelected prime minister when Tony Blair gave up the post, and having a second consecutive unelected Labour prime minister is considered politically untenable.

With the party in a state of despair, having just recorded its lowest vote since 1910 in Sunday's European elections, efforts to secure the backing of 70-plus MPs for a leadership contest failed miserably. Nevertheless, factional conflicts still rage and Brown is fatally wounded. Most commentators predict a resumption of hostilities at the party conference in October.

Whatever follows, the events of recent weeks have revealed the full extent of the internal rot of the Labour Party and its complete transformation into a political creature of the financial oligarchy.

The in-fighting within Labour's apparatus centred almost entirely on members of the cabinet and former ministers. Whether supporters of Brown or more closely associated with ex-Prime Minister Blair, they have all played a key role in implementing Labour's right-wing, pro-business agenda for more than a decade. Not one of those in the forefront of this factional bickering opposed the Iraq war, the invasion of Afghanistan, or the raft of anti-democratic measures associated with the "war on terror."

Labour faces electoral oblivion precisely because millions of working people have turned their backs on the party in disgust after years of political betrayals. They did not vote Labour because they have concluded that it is no less a party of the financial elite than the Conservatives.

None of those who came forward to denounce Brown have even hinted at principled political concerns. Instead, their fire was levelled solely against his personal failings as a leader, while they urged a renewal of everything associated with "New Labour" in the "golden years" under Blair. Behind their reticence in detailing their own policy prescriptions is the fact that their agenda is dictated entirely by the right-wing media, such as the *Daily Telegraph* and, above all, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp.

Though Brown was initially praised by big business for his readiness to provide billions in taxpayer monies to rescue Britain's bankers, the economy has continued to slide further into recession and the pound has declined sharply on world currency markets. This has evoked increasingly strident demands for the imposition of austerity measures and savage cuts in public spending—measures which require the preparation of a major confrontation with the working class.

With Labour lacking any popular support and Brown seen as indecisive, the Conservatives under David Cameron have been praised for their commitment to the imposition of an "age of austerity." Led by the *Telegraph*, a series of revelations of improper expenses claims by MPs have been utilised in an effort to discredit the government and force a general election. But this is a blunt weapon that also threatens to discredit the Tories and Parliament itself.

There was seen to be little alternative, however, given that Labour still commands a significant parliamentary majority. Brown is not required to call an election until

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March 2010. To overcome this problem, measures were taken behind the scenes to recruit some within Labour's leadership to the drive to oust Brown.

Faced with losing Murdoch's backing, a section of the party was more than ready to respond. A campaign was launched, beginning with denunciations of Brown for his decision to raise the highest tax rate to 50 percent and continuing with a series of high-profile and carefully timed ministerial resignations that were meant to destabilise his premiership in the run-up to the local authority and European elections. Nearly every minister who resigned attributed sole responsibility for Labour's massive unpopularity to Brown.

The degree of collusion with Murdoch was underscored by the departure of Works and Pensions Secretary James Purnell, whose resignation letter was leaked to the Murdoch newspapers, the *Times* and the *Sun*.

The problem for the conspirators was the dawning recognition within the Parliamentary Labour Party that they were being asked to commit political hara-kiri. This realisation ensured that no one, including the favoured replacement for Brown, Alan Johnson, was prepared to mount an immediate challenge. Johnson instead accepted the position of home secretary in Brown's cabinet reshuffle, while telling the media that he would consider becoming party leader at a future date.

The most significant role in rescuing Brown was played by former Business Secretary Peter Mandelson. More than any other individual, Mandelson can claim to be the intellectual architect of the New Labour project. He understood that, whatever the illusions of the anti-Brown plotters, more was at stake than Brown's premiership.

"New Labour is not about faces, it's about policies," he stated. Mandelson calculated that if Brown went under current conditions, the party itself would rapidly break up. Moreover, outside the narrow circles of Westminster and the media, no one believed that Brown was the sole architect of Labour's ongoing crisis, and the party would have no real hope of recovering support under a new leader.

To prevent an immediate implosion and buy time in the hope of renewing Labour's alliance with Murdoch and his ilk, Mandelson has stitched together a loose alliance of all those fearing a political shipwreck. His greatest success was to provide the necessary justification for the party's supposed left wing to come to Brown's aid.

All that was required was a vague pledge to delay the planned privatisation of Royal Mail, and only if bids fall short of expectations. The next day, the Communication Workers Union offered the government a three-month moratorium on industrial action, overturning the results of a nine-to-one ballot in London in favour of a strike.

Mandelson has been proclaimed first secretary of state. Although only an honorific title, it implies that he stands above all other members of the government, outside of the prime minister. Nothing more completely gives the lie to the claims that Brown is somehow to the left of his opponents than the elevation of Mandelson—the man who declared that New Labour was "intensely relaxed" about people becoming "filthy rich."

Mandelson is needed as a semi-Bonapartist figure in order to prevent the Parliamentary Labour Party being torn apart by its warring factions. But this is a conflict waged by uniformly right-wing elements, competing for the political favours of the super-rich. This alone ensures that Labour's meltdown will continue to gather pace.

As far as the working class is concerned, Labour is already dead. A new socialist leadership is urgently required for working people. Without this, the right wing will continue to exploit the vacuum created by the wholesale exclusion of working people and their interests from political life.

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