Britain: The denouement looms for Labour

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This was the week that the Labour Party simply died of shame.

Labour's Brighton conference venue was rarely more than half full, even for party leader and Prime Minister Gordon Brown's keynote speech billed as his "fighting comeback." Most of the time there was a sea of empty chairs. Delegates either did not attend the conference at all, or stayed in nearby bars drowning their sorrows. Those that did take their seats had the appearance of the walking dead in a George A. Romero movie—shambling around a cavernous hall without thought, giving only an appearance of the conscious activity of the living.

The week's events began with a declaration to the *Observer* by Chancellor Alistair Darling that the party looked like it had "lost the will to live." On the evening it began, the election results in Germany came through, with the Social Democrats polling just 23 percent, recording their worst result since World War II.

The significance of this electoral debacle was all too predictably not discussed at Brighton, but was noted by the right-wing Labourite Denis MacShane.

"The demise of Germany's left wing reflects an existential crisis across Europe that Labour should be mindful of this week," he wrote in the *Guardian*.

MacShane acknowledged in passing that it was primarily because "Working class wages were held down as employers and unions collaborated to strengthen the capital base of industrial firms" that "Workers not unreasonably turned away from supporting the SPD ministers who thus cut their purchasing power."

This was the picture across Europe, he made clear. The crisis of German social democracy "joins that in France, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands and most of east Europe where the classic 20th century forms of democratic left politics can no longer command electoral majorities," he continued, and is "now facing its most testing time since social democratic, socialist and Labour parties were founded more than a century ago."

In truth the social democrats internationally, and Labour above all, have already failed this test. Far from being of the "left," they are fervent advocates of the policies of "neo-liberalism" and directly associated with the parasitic, speculative practices that brought the world economy to the point of collapse.

So far to the right has Labour shifted that Business Secretary Peter Mandelson was chosen to rally the party for the upcoming general election next year. This is the man most closely associated with "New Labour" and the party's repudiation of its reformist programme, the friend of various Russian oligarchs. It was he that proclaimed he was "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich." He was the subject of Tony Blair's famous 1996 dictum that the "New Labour project" would only be complete when the party "learned to love Peter Mandelson."

The standing ovations he received were proof that what little remains of the party is so politically corrupt that it is not only ready to love him, but is deluded enough to believe he can lead an electoral charge. "If I can come back, we can come back," he insisted.

When Brown himself took to the stage, he attempted the impossible task of dressing up Labour as a "left" alternative to the free-market ideology of the Conservatives.

He portrayed his multibillion rescue package for Britain's bankers as a benevolent action to prevent "a great depression with millions of people's jobs and homes and savings at risk." He chastised David Cameron and the Tories, insisting that "what let the world down last autumn was not just bankrupt institutions but a bankrupt ideology. What failed was the Conservative idea that markets always self-correct but never self-destruct. What failed was the right-wing fundamentalism that says you just leave everything to the market and says that free markets should not just be free but values free."

This was followed by pledges to uphold traditional "middle class" and "working class" values, "the values of the mainstream majority." These included a commitment to free education and universal health care, a pledge that Labour would "not allow those on middle and modest incomes to be buffeted about in a storm not of their making," "raise tax at the very top," "toughen the rules on those who break the rules"—above all bank directors—and ensure that "the banks will pay back the British people."

Most ludicrous of all was his declaration, "I say to you today; markets need morals."

This attempt at populism then took on a pronounced right-wing tenor, with "law-and-order pledges" to clamp down on anti-social behaviour, force all 16- and 17-year-old single

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mothers to be placed in "supervised homes," put "every one of the 50,000 most chaotic families" on a "family intervention project—with clear rules, and clear punishments if they don't stick to them" and "never allow teenage tearaways or anybody else to turn our town centres into no-go areas at nighttimes."

His last such pledge was to clamp down on immigration, by taking "a tough approach to who gets to come to our country and who gets to stay," while tightening up "our points-based immigration system" to ensure "that those who have the skills that can help Britain will be welcomed, and those who do not, will be refused."

Brown's attempt to appeal to all men failed to convince anyone. No worker who has lived through three terms of Labour in office could possibly swallow such a pathetic attempt to portray the party as an opponent of the free market. Everyone knows that Labour is already planning massive and sustained cuts in the public sector that will slash wages, gut services and cost millions their jobs and livelihoods. He even highlighted Labour's "deficit reduction plan to cut the deficit in half over four years," stating that this would "be made law in a new fiscal responsibility act." This would mean Labour would "cut costs, have realistic public sector pay settlements, make savings we know we can."

Brown's "caring" rhetoric is also beyond the pale for its former big business backers, who will tolerate no ambiguity on the necessity for a sustained offensive to force working people to pay for the worsening economic crisis. Rupert Murdoch's the *Sun* headlined its withdrawal of support for Labour on the day of Brown's speech "Labour's lost it," in order to inflict maximum damage.

Its embrace of Blair in 1997 was a signal of the party's success in securing the support of the financial elite for its Thatcherite policies of deregulation and privatisation. Now, the Murdoch media empire has concluded that it must throw everything behind Cameron to give his party some sort of mandate for imposing an austerity programme on a scale without historical precedent.

The *Sun* editorialized that it had backed New Labour in 1997 because it had been "shorn of its destructive hard-Left doctrines." But Labour had still "blown" billions "employing a useless layer of public service middle-managers," "making benefits more lucrative than a pay cheque" and "creating a huge, idle underclass for whom work is a dirty word."

Now was the time when Britain needed a Tory government to restore "our natural entrepreneurship and the will of every family to improve its lot through its own efforts, without depending on handouts," "cut the red tape strangling businesses," make "affordable tax cuts," "reform wasteful public services," combined with "a genuine will to win the war in Afghanistan".

Labour was forced to put on a brave face to counter Murdoch's attack. But behind the scenes it will move heaven and earth to convince him and the social layer he speaks for that it remains the best vehicle for imposing the measures being demanded against the working class—including if necessary offering Brown's head as proof of intent.

Brown is trying to save Labour's political hide by seeking a pact with the Liberal Democrats, offering a referendum on electoral reform and some form of proportional representation instead of Britain's first-past-the-post system. But most of all Labour relies on the support of the trade union bureaucracy to sell the party as the only alternative to "ideologically driven" cuts under the Conservatives.

Unite joint general secretary Tony Woodley pathetically ripped-up a copy of the *Sun* like a lover betrayed, while praising Brown for speaking of "the values that are true to Labour." The GMB's Paul Kenny said that Brown's "was the speech of a prime minister who intends to take the fight to the Tories," while UNISON general secretary Dave Prentis said that he had "definitely set out clear red water between Labour and the Tories."

For their part, the Socialist Workers Party, Britain's largest petty bourgeois left group, insisted, "The fact that Labour, the Tories and the Liberal Democrats are all united in demanding spending cuts adds to a general assumption that all the main parties are essentially the same. But for all its crimes, Labour is not the same as the Tories."

"Talk of the 'death of Labour' is premature," it insisted, "even if a Tory government is elected. The party could revive as a symbol of opposition and could even shift its rhetoric to the left. For people who are shocked by the scale of Tory cuts, Labour could become a beacon of hope, even if it maintains its right-wing policies."

Any such reliance on Labour as a "lesser evil" would only disarm working people. Labour is a right-wing capitalist party and must be replaced by a genuine socialist party to take forward the political and economic struggle against all the representatives of big business to the end.

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