Right-wing agenda dominates Labour Party leadership contest in Britain

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There is nothing to choose between the five contenders for the leadership of the Labour Party—David and Ed Miliband, Ed Balls, Andy Burnham and Diane Abbott. Indeed the contest is a mockery of all those within Labour who claimed the party was engaged in a process of democratic renewal.

For the next few months a mock battle will be played out until the result is announced on September 25, the day before the Labour Party Conference. But the contest is likely to be a two horse race between the two Miliband brothers, both of whom have been at the heart of the New Labour project.

All the contenders are playing by the injunction laid down by Lord Peter Mandelson. He warned them that though the "New Labour" project that he helped establish is "now over, and died on 6 May 2010" when Labour lost the general election, the ideas behind New Labour "should not be cast aside so easily". Instead, behind claims that the party must win back its lost support, the emphasis has been placed on pandering to anti-immigrant prejudice and legitimising attacks on benefit claimants.

Labour grandees, like former home secretary and foreign secretary Jack Straw, called on the contenders to act "responsibly in the interests of the nation" and "reconnect" with "decent, hardworking" families on "issues such as immigration, benefits and fairness".

Balls went furthest in heeding this call, urging that immigration be drastically reduced and for the free movement of workers across Europe to be stopped. This prompted Conservative Education Secretary Michael Gove to compare the former minister for Children, Schools and Families to the Tory MP Enoch Powell, who delivered the notorious "rivers of blood" speech against immigration in 1968. Even David Miliband was forced to distance himself from Balls' outburst.

The candidate of the party's putative left wing, Socialist Campaign Group leader John McDonnell, withdrew after failing to come anyway near securing the minimum 33 nominations needed to put him on the ballot. Just 16 out of a total of 258 Labour MPs were prepared to support him.

The simple reason for McDonnell's defeat is that the left wing in the Labour Party is an insignificant and impotent rump, whose ignominious collapse was plain for all to see when he failed to get sufficient nominations to stand against Gordon Brown following Tony Blair's resignation in 2007. McDonnell had urged a "full and open debate" during the contest, which would supposedly prove that Labour was a democratic party and capable of regaining popular support.

He proposed an "alternative programme" that would set out "a radical new course to challenge the consensus" within the Labour Party. McDonnell's fate proved the opposite. His wish-list of reforms—such as "large scale public investment, ending privatisation, creating and protecting jobs with trade union rights, increasing the national minimum wage, state benefits and pensions, building the homes we need," and withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan—are anathema to the party for which he functions as a loyal political apologist.

After making his token stand, McDonnell threw his weight behind Hackney MP Diane Abbott, declaring, "It is now clear that I am unlikely to secure enough nominations and so am withdrawing in the hope we can at least secure a woman on the ballot paper."

McDonnell's craven retreat is all the more remarkable because Abbott's candidacy was conceived of as a spoiler—designed in part to ensure that someone considered totally reliable could be advanced as representing the party's "left", while encouraging the identity politics that have proved so useful to Labour in dividing the working class and which paid dividends for the Democratic Party in the election of President Barack Obama. It was also hoped that her standing would help quash accusations that the contest was one between the privileged products of Britain's top universities, Oxford and Cambridge, all of whom were, at one time or another, special advisers to Blair and Brown before being rewarded with ministerial appointments.

The claims of Abbott, another Cambridge graduate, to be left-wing rest almost exclusively on an accident of birth—her being both female and black. Her only other claim, voting against the Iraq war, was never pursued or allowed to

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interrupt her career as a TV celebrity hobnobbing with right-wing figures such as Tory MP Michael Portillo and Rupert Murdoch crony Andrew Neil. More importantly, she opposed any investigation of the lies employed to justify going to war—helping convince the party's right wing that she is a safe pair of hands.

McDonnell was not even told that Abbott intended to stand, even though he leads the Socialist Campaign Group to which she belongs. Her behaviour is further proof that the 14-member group, whose last web site posting dates from October 2008, exists in name only.

As the deadline for nominations for the leadership contest approached, front-runner David Miliband announced that he was backing Abbott and Balls urged his supporters to do the same once he had reached the required number of nominations. Acting Labour Party leader Harriet Harman also declared her support, as did Jack Straw and former immigration minister Phil Woolas—both of whom were responsible for some of the most authoritarian and anti-immigration legislation that has ever reached the statute book.

A significant byproduct of the Labour leadership contest is its exposure of the political pretensions of the pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Worker Party (SWP) and the Socialist Party (SP). Both followed in minute detail every twist and turn in the hustings, talked up any sign of support in the trade unions for McDonnell and tales of Labour increasing its membership as encouraging signs of a possible rebirth of the party.

While ritually restating its position that Labour is a capitalist party, the SP maintained that a campaign to "reclaim" New Labour by the trade unions, regurgitated most recently by candidate for Unite general secretary Len McCluskey, would be a "huge step forward". This formed the basis of its own support for McDonnell, who was described as "the only candidate that stands in defence of workers' interests."

For its part, the Socialist Workers Party still argues that Labour remains a workers' party due to its "link with the organised working class through its union affiliations" and that the General Election result, in which Labour did not suffer the scale of meltdown some had anticipated, somehow "showed the enduring strength of Labourism" and the beginning of a "return to Labour" by the working class.

For the duration of the nomination campaign the SWP turned over the pages of *Socialist Worker* to McDonnell, but unlike the Socialist Party hedged its bets by also boosting Abbott as another of "the left-wing candidates" to "lay out their visions for the party after the election defeat."

The June 5 edition declared it "unequivocally" supported McDonnell for leader and called for trade unionists to "do all they can" to help because his election would mean workers would get more support from Labour, encourage them to strike and protest and "create greater opportunities." But the paper also said it was in agreement with many of the points put forward by Abbott.

With the defeat of McDonnell the SWP moved seamlessly behind Abbott and set about manufacturing some left credentials for her. She is boosted as "a consistent and principled opponent of the war in Iraq", with "a good record over defending civil liberties" and who opposes Britain's nuclear weapons and condemns the "scapegoating of immigrants."

"[I]n a contest between an anti-war left candidate and four former New Labour ministers, we back Diane Abbott," the SWP declares. "If she uses the leadership election to offer a clear challenge to those who want to oppose the brutal cuts on services, opposition to the war in Afghanistan and to defend migrant workers, that can provide an important boost to the fightback we urgently need."

These groups cling to figures such as McDonnell and Abbott because they function as a political adjunct of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, to which they cede all authority. Whatever their rhetorical demands, they are hostile to any political movement that might develop outside of the bureaucracy's control that would endanger their own numerous positions within the union apparatus at local, regional and national level.

Instead of a "rebirth" of reformism, what is being developed during the leadership contest is an agenda even further to the right of that pursued in the dying days of the last Labour government. There is surely no further proof required to show the impossibility of "reclaiming" the party. Labour is a hostile entity, a party of big capital, whose central aim in the coming period will be to divide the working class by reinforcing the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition's scapegoating of immigrants and welfare claimants to justify the deepening assault on jobs, wages and services.

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