

Labour's leadership contest enters final weeks

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16 September 2010

The winner of the Labour Party leadership contest will be declared immediately prior to the start of the party's annual conference in two weeks' time. Whoever wins from the slate of five candidates will be an advocate of the pro-market big business agenda pursued under the previous leaderships of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

None of them is opposing the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund and being implemented by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition. They all agree that in some form or other these cuts have to be made and would do so if they were in power. The only disagreement some of them have is the method and speed with which they are imposed.

For the second time since the resignation of Tony Blair, there is not even a token "left" candidate standing, despite the desperate efforts of the Stalinist *Morning Star*, the Socialist Workers Party and others to present the black MP for Hackney, Diane Abbott, as the "progressive alternative". Abbott is the longest-serving Member of Parliament appearing on the ballot. During the last two decades, she has remained loyal to the party even as, since coming to power in 1997, it has launched two imperialist wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and betrayed thousands of workers' struggles.

Today, Labour's membership is drawn overwhelmingly from a thin layer of egotistical elements of the middle class who are deeply hostile to the working class. Its right-wing character is revealed by the political positions of the five candidates.

David Miliband, the front-runner and former foreign secretary, stands unashamedly as the defender and continuer of Blair's legacy. He insists that he is proud of Labour's record and is for further "reforms", which means more privatisation of state assets and pandering to the financial markets. While belatedly making a verbal acknowledgement that "mistakes were made" in Iraq, he fully supports the war in Afghanistan.

The only candidate in a position to beat Miliband is his younger brother, Ed, based on second-preference votes from defeated challengers. He says the party must "turn the page on the past" and "move on". In other words, he wants no critical assessment of Labour's role in government. Instead, he wants the party to open itself up to wider sections of society, ranging from those in the unions to those working in voluntary

organisations. This is not very far from Tory leader David Cameron's plan for a "Big Society", which is based on slashing jobs in the public and social service and replacing them through the use of unpaid voluntary labour and charitable organisations. Ed Miliband has the support of the majority of the trade union bosses.

Ed Balls, the former secretary of the treasury, is calling for a slower rate in the repayment of the national debt. He claims money can be used to maintain sections of the public services, which will prevent the UK's economy tipping into a double-dip recession. This is allied to a demand for some form of national protectionism to defend "British jobs for British workers".

John Burnham is the former health minister and another avid Blairite. He presents himself as an "ordinary northern boy", who can unite the party and its squabbling southern factions. As someone who has presided over the destruction of the National Health Service, his main claim that he will defend it against dismantling by the Tory-Lib-Dem coalition is doubly cynical.

Those who assert that Diane Abbott represents a left-wing alternative claim she was the only candidate to vote in Parliament against the Iraq war and is a non-ministerial anti-establishment "outsider" who will defend oppressed minorities such as ethnic communities, women and single mums. The truth is that Abbott has made herself a wealthy woman by mixing with the business and power elite throughout the UK, Europe, the Caribbean and the United States. She cast a vote against the Iraq war not fundamentally because of any feeling of solidarity with the Iraqi people, but from the nationalist standpoint that the war would further undermine British imperialism's strategic interests in the Middle East. Her campaign is not directed towards workers or to oppressed youth, but towards the middle class layers that dominate in the feminist groups and the ethnic community organisations.

In the last weeks, the leadership contest has been given prominent coverage in the media, after weeks of low-key reporting. The *Observer* and the *Independent* both had two full pages on the Miliband brothers. These articles spent some time going over the political history of their late father, Ralph, who in the 1960s was a leading representative of the New Left. These articles serve a twofold purpose. They provide the

brothers with a connection to past radical traditions, while at the same time enabling them to explain that, while they respected their father's politics, the world had moved on and politicians today had to do the same. The *Sun* carried interviews over successive days with each candidate, with the exception of Abbott, who declined its offer—winning plaudits from many hostile to the Murdoch press.

The BBC's *Newsnight* assembled a random panel made up of 12 men and women to hear a three-minute presentation by all five candidates. The most astute comment was made by one of the older members of the panel, who said angrily, "It all sounds so bland. There is no intellectual rigour".

This is the striking aspect of both the contest and the reporting of it. There is no serious addressing of major political questions regarding war, the world economy, the poverty affecting millions of people and the impact of the austerity measures. Whereas one of the Milibands is the most likely winner, the increasingly febrile political situation makes it hard to make any definite prediction. There are signs that all the candidates are making an attempt to adapt to a mood they perceive is developing throughout the country. When asked in one series of interviews if they were socialist, all the candidates answered "yes", while emptying the term of any real meaning and invoking abstract platitudes such "togetherness" and "helping each other".

Nevertheless, their claim is considered an important concession to public sentiment. Since the General Election in May, every mechanism of the capitalist state's propaganda machine has attempted to manipulate "public opinion" in support of the Tory-Lib-Dem coalition and its brutal austerity measures. The message is that all sections of society must "share the pain" of the recession and help the country reduce its huge budget deficit by accepting job cuts, wage restraint and the dismantling of the social services.

This might have had an impact for a short time among some politically naive layers, but this only lasts until the effects of these policies become apparent. Then the working class and most middle class people will find they are the ones expected to carry the full burden of the financial crisis, while the bourgeoisie and a thin layer of the upper middle class wax fat on the profits that come directly out of the misery imposed upon the rest of society.

The full effects of the coalition's first budget containing £11 billion in cuts are yet to be felt. They have been deliberately introduced in a staggered, piecemeal fashion in an attempt to divide the working class's response. On October 20, the second round of £4 billion in cuts will be introduced just as the initial cuts make their full impact felt. There are widespread fears within ruling circles that this will unleash a mass movement in opposition.

Political events in Britain are being driven by world events and the deepening capitalist economic crisis. The US financial

debacle is leading to developments in the class struggle in America and rapidly rippling out internationally. Europe has passed through the first wave of opposition by workers to cuts, expressed in strikes and mass demonstrations in Greece, Italy, Spain and France.

The Tory-Lib-Dem coalition has only been in office six months, yet it is already trying to avoid splits and divisions. The extreme Thatcherite right of the Tory party wanted Cameron to establish a minority Tory government and not a coalition. They have jumped with almost unrestrained glee on the scandal surrounding the foreign secretary, William Hague, and his former aide, Christopher Myers, with whom he shared a hotel bedroom. These Tory "anti-coalitionists" claim that this incident and a personal statement about the problems that he and his wife are having producing a child place a question mark over his political judgement.

The same question of "judgement" is being raised about Cameron and his dogged defence of his communications director, Andy Coulson, who is accused of being involved in widespread phone tapping while working as editor on Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World*.

Meanwhile, it has been reported that four out of ten people who voted Liberal Democrat at the last election will never vote for them again. All of this is terrifying those Liberal Democrat MPs that do not enjoy the privilege of sitting on the government front bench.

Under these stresses and strains on the coalition government, it is not fanciful to imagine its collapse and a new general election being called in the not too distant future.

The coalition could not survive in any case without the trade union bureaucracy's opposition to any unified struggle against the austerity programme. There is deep scepticism in the working class towards Labour, because the experience of the last government is still fresh in their minds. But there is still a lack of political clarity, particularly on the role of the trade unions. The ruling class is making plans to use them again in some political capacity or another.

This is the reason the Labour Party leadership has suddenly become an urgent issue for the bourgeoisie. A Labour government, or some constellation of political forces headed by Labour, could quite unexpectedly be back in power—far sooner than any one expected, including the party's own leadership.



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