

Who is responsible for the growth in support for the British National Party?

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The far right British National Party are expected to receive an increased vote in the Barnsley Central by-election on March 3. Responsibility for the growth in support for this racist group rests primarily with the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

The Barnsley Central by-election is being held because Eric Illsley, a Member of Parliament for the Labour Party for 25 years, was amongst those caught fiddling parliamentary expenses to the tune of £14,000. Sentenced to 12 months, he is the second Labour MP to be jailed for making false expenses claims.

The media-generated scandal was utilised by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats to posture as a “cleaner” alternative to Labour, despite their own milking of the expenses system, and certainly helped undermine support for Illsley, whose vote dropped by 10 percent. It was also seized on by the BNP to provide a populist veneer for their rightist agenda. But the hostility to Labour, which the BNP has been able to benefit from, predates the expenses scandal and is rooted in far more profound questions.

The decline in Labour’s support is the result of years of its pursuing pro-business policies that culminated in the handing over of over £1 trillion to the bankers to rescue them from the result of their own speculative activities. This is what produced a mass abstention from Labour, enabling the Conservatives to come to power in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats—which the BNP also utilises for its own purposes.

Throughout Labour’s term in office, it enjoyed the active collaboration of the trade unions, which have continued their efforts to suppress all opposition to the major corporations since the Tories and Lib-Dems took office.

Illsley himself began his career as a full time official of the National Union of Mineworkers, sharing responsibility for the defeat of the 1984-1985 miners’ strike that initiated a quarter-century decline in the social position of the working class. This has found morbid expression in the former mining areas such as Barnsley. Mining employed 20,000 people in Barnsley in 1984, or 22 percent of the workforce. Today the constituency is one of the poorest in the country, ranking 20th from the bottom in England.

Social misery has worsened since the onset of the world

economic crisis, with unemployment rising from 4.4 percent in 2008 to 10.5 percent in 2010. Amongst youth and older workers, unemployment rates are more than triple this level. Unemployment for youth under 24 stands at 34.9 percent, the highest in the South Yorkshire region. A Poundstretcher store that opened last week saw 700 people apply for 35 jobs. A report by Save the Children found 15 percent of children living in extreme poverty. There are 16,000 workers on incapacity benefits, many still suffering from their injuries and health problems from working in the pits.

It is anticipated that an additional 1,200 council staff will lose their jobs over the next four years, thanks to cuts that will be imposed by the Labour-controlled council. These are the fifth largest cuts per capita in the country.

The BNP has been able to capitalise on the social despair and anger that Labour has created, with the full collaboration of the trade unions. In the last general election, the BNP was able to increase its vote in many former Labour constituencies—the overall total increasing from 192,000 in 2005 to 562,000 in 2010. In Barnsley they received 8.9 percent of the vote, up 4.5 percent. Andrew Brons is one of two BNP Members of the European Parliament, for Yorkshire and Humber which covers Barnsley, along with party leader Nick Griffin, MEP for the North West.

Labour is also chiefly responsible for BNP’s ability to channel political and social discontent along xenophobic lines, blaming immigrants and asylum seekers, as well as second and third generation British Muslims, for all manner of social ills—from unemployment, through to the pressure on vital social services such as health and housing produced by cuts to crime.

Labour stirred up anti-Muslim sentiment as part of its efforts to justify its predatory wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the ramp of repressive legislation associated with the “war on terror”.

Only in January, for example, former Labour Defence Minister Jack Straw responded to the conviction of two Pakistani men on sexual assault charges by stating that the entire Pakistani community must face up to “a number of Pakistani heritage men thinking it is okay to target white girls for sexual abuse.” BNP leaders stood trial on charges of racial incitement for using almost identical language in 2005, though

they were not convicted.

Straw's provocative outburst was grist to the mill for the BNP whose candidate, Enis Dalton, mixes denunciations of Labour with claims that she is standing to ensure that women are not "subjected to humiliating treatment by Muslim rape gangs".

The BNP's naked anti-Muslim message only amplifies the propaganda of the major parties. Last month Prime Minister David Cameron all but made anti-Muslim prejudice official policy when he declared that the main terrorist threat came from "young men who follow a completely perverse, warped interpretation of Islam," and that this was a product of "state multi-culturalism."

Even the Labour Party's selection as candidate for Barnsley is an attempt to outdo the jingoism of the BNP: David Jarvis, a Major in the 1st Battalion in the parachute regiment. Labour's *Tribune* magazine boasted, "As a former Army major who spent 15 years in the Parachute regiment—he served with special forces in Helmand—he also neutralises the threat from the BNP, whose fake patriotism is no match for the real thing."

The electoral success of the BNP still begs the question of why it is that such a far-right organisation has been able to capitalise on anti-Labour sentiment and social discontent. A look at the ballot paper in Barnsley Central goes some way to providing an answer. Standing against Labour are the BNP, the anti-European and anti-immigrant UK Independence Party, its nationalist rival, the English Democrats, the governing Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, the Monster Raving Looney Party and two independents—of which one claims the mantle of "Real Labour".

The BNP has easily the highest political profile and "anti-establishment" credentials, thanks to constant promotion by some sections of the media and because the occasional press attacks on it come from organs defending the status-quo.

In this situation the most politically insidious role is played by the pseudo-left groupings.

The Socialist Workers Party, which stood candidates jointly in the general election as the Trade Unionists and Socialist Coalition, did not stand in Barnsley Central. Instead it has focused on anti-Nazi protests organised under the banner of Love Music Hate Racism and Unite Against Fascism—organisations largely funded by the Trades Union Congress and endorsed by both Labour leader Ed Miliband and Cameron and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg! Their campaign centres on calls to "Vote Anyone but Nazi/BNP" and "Reclaim our Town for Democrats".

Occasionally mentioning deteriorating social conditions as a reason for growing support for the BNP, the SWP opposes any and all criticisms of Labour in line with maintaining its positions within the trade union bureaucracy.

Of similar significance is the decision of the Socialist Labour Party of former NUM leader Arthur Scargill not to stand in a constituency it contested in the general election as well as

Barnsley East. The SLP secured only one percent of the vote against Illsley, a measure of how discredited Scargill is as a result of the disastrous failure of his leadership of the miners' strike and the decimation of the union he led.

The legacy is expressed in every aspect of life in Barnsley. Despite the courageous and heroic stand taken by the miners against Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government, they were isolated by the TUC and the Labour Party—a betrayal which Scargill refused to politically oppose. The miners' strike was the last example of a major industrial struggle by any union in Britain. Its defeat signalled the beginning of the forced march to the right and the abandonment of any defence of the social interests by the entire trade union and Labour bureaucracy that culminated in the creation of New Labour under Tony Blair.

While the SWP all but calls for a Labour vote, the SLP advances itself as a Labour Party Mark Two and is generally seen as a vanity project for Scargill, championing trade unions that have singly failed to defend the working class, as well as nostalgia for the Soviet Union of Joseph Stalin. The net result is to associate "socialism" with a defence of the existing order and the widely despised Labour Party and the TUC.

The struggle against the emergence of the far-right tendencies cannot be pursued by declaring an amnesty with "democrats" in the Tory and Labour Parties, but only through a determined struggle against them all to defend the vital social concerns of working people. Only a political struggle to defend every job, every service and to oppose any and all efforts to divide each against all—white, black, native-born and immigrant—can effectively oppose the job cuts and austerity measures being imposed in Barnsley and throughout the UK.

On this basis the BNP can be swept aside and its poisonous message exposed as simply a last line of defence for big business in preventing the emergence of a united movement of the working class. The Socialist Equality Party fights for such an internationalist and socialist offensive.



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