

UK Labour Party whips up anti-immigrant sentiment

Robert Stevens
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Britain's Labour Party has staked its political fortunes on an overtly anti-immigrant campaign for "British jobs for British workers."

Shadow Minister for Borders and Immigration Chris Bryant gave a speech last Monday in which he derided "the negative effects migration can have on the UK labour market."

Trailing his speech in the previous day's *Sunday Telegraph*, Bryant singled out "unscrupulous employers whose only interest seems to be finding labour as cheaply as possible, will recruit workers in large numbers in low wage countries in the EU, bring them to the UK, charge the costs of their travel and their substandard accommodation against their wages and still not even meet the national minimum wage."

"That is unfair", he added, noting that it "exploits migrant workers" before getting to the substance of his message—that "it makes it impossible for settled workers with mortgages and a family to support at British prices to compete."

In the trailed version, Bryant specifically cited the UK's largest supermarket Tesco employing 230,000 workers and the clothing retailer Next as examples of firms recruiting immigrant workers in favour of British ones. Bryant claimed Tesco had moved a distribution centre to Kent where "a large percentage" of staff were from "Eastern bloc" countries. Workers at an original site, "most of them British, were told that they could only move to the new centre if they took a cut in pay."

Bryant then described how Next brought in 500 Polish workers "to work in their South Elmsall [West Yorkshire] warehouse for their summer sale and another 300 this summer. They were recruited in Poland and charged £50 to find them accommodation. The advantage to Next? They get to avoid Agency Workers Regulations which apply after a candidate has

been employed for over 12 weeks, so Polish temps end up considerably cheaper than the local workforce which includes many former Next employees."

Within 24 hours Bryant was forced to backtrack in response to interventions from both companies. Tesco pointed out it did not even have a distribution centre in Kent.

In his delivered speech he referred to both as "good employers" who "often try to go the extra mile to find good local workers."

It was left to Conservative MP for Harlow, Robert Halfon, to note that many workers in his constituency were forced to take redundancy when Tesco operations shifted its operations to Dagenham, in Essex, rather than accept a pay cut of up to £10,000.

Having abandoned any criticism of the employers, Bryant then continued to beat the anti-immigrant drum. The previous Labour government had "made mistakes on immigration", he said. We "were right to introduce the points based system [for foreign workers to enter the UK] in 2008". He added, "We should have done that far earlier."

He continued, "And when the new A8 [Eastern European accession] countries joined the EU we were so focused on economic growth that when Germany, France and Italy all put in transitional controls on new EU workers, we went it alone. The result? A far higher number of people came to work here."

Labour is naturally opposed to increasing the wages of all workers, immigrants included. Bryant's mistake was that, whereas the ruling elite back anti-immigrant rhetoric as a means to divert attention from their own responsibility for the growing economic crisis, they do not want this to cut across the necessary flow of immigrant labour into the country that is indeed used to continually lower wages and conditions, setting new

benchmarks for all workers.

A *Times* editorial, “Labour Pains—An ill-informed attack on big companies’ recruitment of foreign workers backfires”, described Bryant’s speech as “bad economics couched in inflammatory terms”. The speech was a “failure to acknowledge that labour from overseas can improve the efficiency of the economy”, it warned.

Bryant is a former Conservative Party member and an elected officeholder in the Oxford University Conservative Association. He made his speech after a number of backbench Labour MPs had complained that during the last weeks, party leader Ed Miliband had failed to put forward any coherent policies.

Shadow Health Secretary Andy Burnham said the party had to “shout louder” and “put our cards on the table” before next spring. Backbench MP Graham Stringer spoke of his concern over the “deafening silence” of the Labour leader and his shadow cabinet over the summer. Stringer called for the return to the shadow cabinet of Lord Peter Mandelson, the former close adviser to ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair, in order to get the “message across.”

Miliband himself attempted to reply to the criticisms by adopting a more populist tone in opposition to falling living standards. Stating that Labour would focus on the “cost of living crisis”, he proclaimed during a walkabout in a south London market, “Absolutely we’ve got answers. On rail fares, on energy prices, on payday lenders, on a fairer tax system.”

But Miliband's response was given short shift by most of the press. The *Times*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, editorialised Tuesday that “Labour still has nothing of note to say about education, health or welfare... Until Labour can offer a defensible account of how it intends to keep spending under control, and what that will mean for specific cuts in real departments, there will be no political dividend from merely promising to be careful with the finances. ...

“The Government's message has been clarified”, it concluded. “In the midst of change, Labour has said nothing. Time is now short.”

Labour is being told to jump by the ruling class—on imposing austerity and in whipping up anti-immigrant sentiment to create a scapegoat for the impact of savage cuts. Its response on both issues is to ask, “How high?”

By the planned 2015 general election, the intention is there will be no distinguishable differences between the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Labour.

Miliband’s leadership has already been marked by a pronounced rightward shift. He is a supporter of the “Blue Labour” tendency, which promotes anti-immigrant chauvinism, support for the free market and condemnation of what remains of Britain’s welfare state. Leading the party’s ongoing policy review, ahead of the general election, is Jon Cruddas, a founding member of Blue Labour.

Hence Bryant’s reference to “Eastern bloc” countries, which no longer exist but which is intended to play to anti-communist prejudice. His speech followed a diatribe against immigration delivered in March by Miliband, which was followed by a policy speech on the subject by Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper. Espousing a series of right-wing policies indistinguishable from the Conservatives, Cooper stated that there “needs to be a mature recognition that there are different kinds of immigration—immigration that works and immigration that doesn’t, both for the immigrant and the country.”



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