

UK: Labour capitulates on Conservative welfare cuts bill

Paul Mitchell
22 July 2015

The second reading of the Conservative government's Welfare Reform and Work Bill passed by 308 votes to 124 on Monday night.

Just 48 Labour MPs, less than a quarter of the party's 256 total, defied party whips to abstain and voted no. Of the four contenders for the post of Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn was the only one to vote against. His rivals—Yvette Cooper, Andy Burnham and Liz Kendall—all abstained after a Labour amendment, promoted as a way to defeat the bill, was rejected.

The Scottish Nationalists (SNP), Liberal Democrats, Greens and Democratic Unionists (DUP) all opposed the bill.

The bill's measures will plunge millions of workers and youth further into economic insecurity and poverty. The homeless charity Shelter explained that unemployed families will not be able to afford to live in large parts of England under the new, lower benefit cap in the bill.

After the debate, Labour MP Frank Field, chairman of the parliamentary work and pensions committee, revealed that 3.2 million workers will lose an average of £1,350 next year and that nearly 600,000 of the poorest working families will, in effect, be "taxed" for the first time and proportionally more than the top earners. Families earning £6,410 a year will be £1,200 worse off.

Last week, Labour's interim leader Harriet Harman insisted that the party should not adopt "blanket opposition" to Conservative cuts and back some measures in the bill, including a lower cap on the total amount of welfare benefits payable to a family and cuts to tax credits. Harman declared, "We're not going to be voting against the Welfare Bill, we're not going to be opposing the Household Benefit cap."

Harman offered a get-out clause to Labour MPs

seeking to make a token show of opposition by agreeing to a proposal suggested by Burnham and tabling an amendment prior to the debate. The amendment ceded almost everything to the Tory cuts agenda, supporting "controls on and reforms to the overall costs of social security" and "necessary changes to the welfare system," but then called for the bill to be rejected because it would increase child poverty and represented "an unfair approach to people who are sick and disabled."

Harman insisted Labour MPs had to abstain and not vote against the main bill if the amendment failed (which it was bound to do), opposing only specific measures in the bill during committee-stage discussions.

Burnham staked out his own position as a supporter of welfare reform, declaring, "As you know, I was very clear last weekend that we could not simply abstain on this bill and that we needed to set out where we have agreement with reforms, but more importantly, where we strongly disagree."

"Our reasoned amendment sets out clearly our opposition to many aspects of the bill. In truth, it could be stronger but it declines to give the bill a second reading and, therefore, voting for it tonight is the right thing to do."

After the vote, Burnham cynically declared, "Tonight I am firing the starting gun on Labour's opposition to this bill. If I am elected leader in September, I am determined that Labour will fight this regressive bill, word by word, line by line."

The leadership contest is the outcome of the massive losses sustained by Labour in the May 7 general election, which was rejected as the advocate of more "sensible" austerity and widely regarded as simply a "lite" variant of the Tories. It was all but wiped out in

Scotland by the SNP and lost support in many of its former strongholds in England, enabling the Conservatives to form a majority government with just 36 percent of the vote. Labour leader Ed Miliband resigned.

The shortlist for Miliband's replacement was whittled down to Blairite favourite Kendall and former Labour ministers Burnham and Cooper. Only at the last minute did the party's small group of "left" MPs—gathered around the Socialist Campaign Group/Left Platform—put forward Corbyn. Even then he required the nomination of MPs who would not have normally supported him, but are concerned at Labour's exposure as a transparently pro-austerity party.

Because of the right-wing character of his opponents, and despite the lacklustre nature of his own programme and remarks, Corbyn has gained broad support at the grassroots level, as well as benefitting from an organised campaign by the pseudo-left groups to persuade people to sign up to Labour to get him elected. He has won enough nominations from constituency parties to put him second place behind Burnham, and he has received the support of Unite, Britain's biggest trade union and Labour's largest financial backer. General Secretary Len McCluskey, who is bitterly hostile to any break with Labour, made clear that his support for Corbyn was necessary if the party was to retain any credibility.

This has provoked a backlash by the Blairite wing of the party, including at least three who voted to put Corbyn on the ballot. One told the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* that Corbyn's apparent surge has "sucked" attention from the other leadership candidates and forced them to adopt a softer position on welfare reform.

In these circumstances the Tories made a direct appeal to the Blairite right wing of the Labour Party prior to the vote. In a *Guardian* article, Chancellor George Osborne urged "moderate" and "progressive" MPs in the Labour Party to support the bill, saying it was what the public wanted and built on mainstream Labour thinking: "With the vote coming on Monday night, I urge moderate Labour MPs not to make the same mistake as in the last parliament, when they refused to support each and every welfare reform we proposed. I say: vote with us."

The determination of the party leadership to prove its

pro-austerity, pro-business credentials has raised speculation as to a possible split in the party being voiced across the political spectrum.

The *Telegraph* speculated about Blairites decamping in the face of a Corbyn victory, before dismissing this as a probable outcome to the leadership contest and suggesting that individual Labour MPs might switch to the Tories anyway. Either development would have the effect of strengthening the Tories, who presently enjoy only a slim majority of just 12 MPs.

According to Corbyn campaigner Max Shanley, Corbyn, if he won, would "face problems not just inside the Parliamentary Labour Party, which I think is likely to split if he wins with the Blairites bugging off to form a new SDP [Social Democratic Party], but also from the Labour Party bureaucracy."

If he lost, "the left of the Labour Party could either end up leaving the party in droves or being crushed even further by a triumphant Labour right. Sadly I think the latter is more likely should Corbyn fail to be victorious."

Whatever fate eventually befalls the Labour Party, it has been exposed once again as a bitter enemy of the working class—ready to support the Tories in anything they want to do as a fellow party of austerity and war.

Earlier on Monday, Shadow Defence Secretary Vernon Croaker used a debate forced on the Tories by revelations that the government had allowed British pilots to participate in bombing raids in Syria, in defiance of two parliamentary votes, to declare Labour's readiness to support future British bombing missions. Labour "stands ready to work with the government to defeat ISIL," he said.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact