

UK Labour Party descends into crisis over leadership contest

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The Labour Party leadership contest in the UK has descended into farce, with calls for it to be suspended and even threats of a coup should the “wrong” candidate win.

The reaction has been evoked by the prospect that Jeremy Corbyn could be on track to beat his three contenders, Andy Burnham, Yvette Cooper and Liz Kendall.

The leadership race is the first held under a “one member, one vote” system. Modelled on US primaries, anyone who takes out a £3 Labour Party membership can vote. While proclaimed as a means of keeping Labour in touch with public sentiment, its real objective was to remove the party leadership from any semblance of control by its dwindling rank-and-file.

Having lost the May general election as working class voters deserted it in droves, some in the leadership considered that it was necessary to have a token “left” candidate in the race. Not only would it provide an inclusive gloss to the contest, but Corbyn’s expected failure would be touted as proof that there was no constituency for even the barest hint of redistributive measures in the party. This was especially considered vital as Labour signed up to pledges of ever-greater austerity.

It was on this basis that a number of Corbyn’s nominal political opponents supported his candidacy, ensuring his last-minute entry into the race.

Corbyn himself never anticipated that he could win. An MP for more than 30 years, his opposition to one or another of Labour’s most noxious policies—such as support for the Iraq war—has never impinged on the party’s rightwards trajectory.

But Labour’s drubbing in the election has led to his warning that the party faces the same fate as its counterparts in Europe, whose support for austerity has

seen them cast into the political oblivion. To avoid the danger of “Pasokification”—a reference to the collapse of Pasok in Greece due to its role in enforcing savage austerity—Corbyn argues that Labour must learn the lessons of events in both Greece and Spain.

In these countries, he said, “It’s very interesting that social democratic parties that accept the austerity agenda and end up implementing it end up losing a lot of members and a lot of support.

“I think we have a chance to do something different here.”

Corbyn’s warning has been backed by 27 Labour parliamentary candidates who failed to win seats in the election. In an open letter backing his candidacy, they stressed that the party lost the election because it “failed to challenge the fundamental economic consensus on austerity. This cost all of us votes.”

This is a message that will go unheeded by the party leadership. Only last week, Burnham, Cooper and Kendall abstained in the vote on the government’s latest round of welfare cuts that will throw tens of thousands further into poverty. This allows the measure to pass based on a policy decision by acting party head Harriet Harman.

As the only candidate to have voted against, Corbyn now finds himself in the lead, with a projected 53 percent based on second preferences to 47 percent for Burnham, the one-time favourite.

In response, Labour MP John Mann is leading the call for Harman to halt the contest so that “proper checks” can be conducted on new members, the bulk of whom are reportedly supporting Corbyn’s candidacy.

Mann complained that the contest “is totally out of control”, alleging that Corbyn’s backers are those who “have opposed the Labour party and want to break it up....”

Mann claims to have proof that “Trotskyite” organisations are out to disrupt the race. Caroline Flint, the shadow energy secretary who is running for the deputy leadership, has demanded, “Anyone identified as not sharing the aims or values of the Labour Party should be denied a vote in the leadership elections.”

Under the headline, “Hard left plot to infiltrate Labour race”, the *Times* cited the support for Corbyn’s candidacy extended by the Communist Party of Great Britain and Green Party “activists.” It complained that some of the new members “have previously stood as candidates for the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, an electoral alliance including the Socialist Workers’ Party, founded by Bob Crow, the late hard left leader of the RMT rail union.”

Much of the pseudo-left have indeed rallied to Corbyn’s side. Far from being a “hard left” plot to destroy the party, however, their concern is to preserve Labour’s role as the main political opposition to socialism and revolution. The Communist Party of Great Britain has long maintained the fiction that Labour is a “workers’ party” to this end, while the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition was formed as an electoral bloc between sections of the trade union bureaucracy and the pseudo-left as a means of preventing a political rebellion against Labour.

This also accounts for the backing that Corbyn has won from Unite, Britain’s largest union, along with several other unions. The greatest fear of the trade union bureaucracy is that Labour’s too obvious adoption of Tory policies will open the way for the emergence of a new, socialist, workers’ party.

But rather than proving Labour’s continued relevance to workers and youth, Corbyn’s candidacy has instead laid bare just how sclerotic, moribund and right-wing the party is. Faced with the possibility that it may be required to adopt an oppositional pose, it has gone into meltdown.

Last week, former prime minister Tony Blair was wheeled out to insist that those saying Labour should go with its “heart” should “get a transplant.” Lord Peter Mandelson, who infamously boasted that Labour was “intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich,” complained that the party’s existence as an “effective electoral force” is now at stake.

Several Labour donors have made open threats to remove their funding if Corbyn wins, amid warnings of

a possible palace coup and split in the party.

The *Telegraph* reported, “Senior Labour MPs are plotting to oust Jeremy Corbyn if he is elected party leader,” with “shadow cabinet sources” telling the newspaper that a “coup could be launched within days of the result” on September 12.

“We will have to decide whether he should be removed immediately, or whether it would be better to give him a year or two of being a disaster and get rid of him by 2018,” the unnamed MP said.

Lord David Owen, who led the right-wing break from Labour in 1981 to form the Social Democratic Party, warned such a move would make another “split a little bit more likely if they move precipitously.”

Owen said, “Some of them may take the view that they cannot live with this situation [a Corbyn victory] even for as much as a year. But that would be very divisive. I would suck it and see.”

There have been calls for Cooper and Kendall, trailing badly in the polls, to withdraw from the race and transfer their support to Burnham. But that has only caused ructions within the self-interested, privileged clique that constitutes the Labour Party, with the two women claiming they were the victims of sexism.



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