

What does the “Jeremy Corbyn phenomenon” represent?

Chris Marsden, Julie Hyland
15 August 2015

British political life is dominated by speculation over whether Jeremy Corbyn will win leadership of the Labour Party.

A new “one member, one vote” system for the leadership contest was meant to help consolidate the party’s right-wing course, based on the assumption that the electorate—or, more properly, the narrow social layer to which all the parties pitch their rotten wares—shared the party’s concerns and prejudices. This appears to have backfired.

The decision to open up the contest to anyone defining himself as a Labour supporter on payment of just £3, and to allow individual affiliation through the trade unions, has drawn sufficient numbers supporting Corbyn’s anti-austerity appeal to potentially tip the balance in his favour.

For the media and most Labour Party parliamentarians, this prospect is regarded as a threat to the neo-liberal agenda pursued by Labour and the entire ruling elite for more than three decades. On what passes for the “left,” it has been hailed as opening the way for Labour’s renewal as a party for working people. It is, in fact, neither.

What is alternatively described as “Corbyn-mania” and the “Corbyn phenomenon” certainly reflects broader leftward sentiment. The hysterical attacks on the veteran Labour “left” MP as a relic of a failed socialist utopia has little traction, especially among young people who know only too well the failures of capitalism and are looking for an alternative.

The more Corbyn comes under attack, the more attractive he becomes to working people. Two interventions by the former Labour prime minister Tony Blair warning against Corbyn’s victory only prompted a surge in applications to back Corbyn. Registered and affiliated supporters now outweigh Labour Party members, though Corbyn records majority support in all three categories.

Corbyn is also helped by comparison with the self-serving scoundrels he is contesting—Andy Burnham, Yvette Cooper and Liz Kendall. He has a record of voting against the worst excesses of New Labour, has called for Blair to face war crime charges for aiding the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, and was the only leadership candidate to vote against the Conservative government’s latest package of welfare cuts.

However, those looking to a Corbyn victory to provide an alternative to austerity will be cruelly disappointed. The real measure of his campaign must be judged not on stated intentions, but on the essential criterion of the class interests served by the party and the programme he defends.

Labour is a right-wing bourgeois party. It is complicit in all the crimes of British imperialism and has functioned as the principal political opponent of socialism for more than a century. Yet Corbyn has consistently defended Labour’s political authority as an MP for 33 years—the period in which the party resolutely cut any remaining connection to the working class. Nothing—not the repudiation of social ownership, illegal wars, or the party’s obsequious kowtowing before the financial oligarchy—has disturbed his position on Labour’s backbenches.

This is not a matter of misplaced loyalty. A longstanding political opponent of independent working class struggle, Corbyn insists that the only legitimate form of opposition is one that is subordinate to Labour and

the trade unions and directed through Parliament.

Even now, in the face of Blairite threats to stop the election and split the party, Corbyn decries any struggle against the right wing as “personality politics” and has offered his opponents positions in any shadow cabinet he forms.

An attempt to save Labour

Corbyn’s decision to enter the leadership race at the last moment was taken in the aftermath of the party’s debacle in the May general election. The party’s inability to make any headway against a hated and reviled Conservative government, after five years of savage austerity, revealed that the alienation of workers and youth from Labour had reached a tipping point. Faced with the danger of Labour collapsing like the social democratic PASOK in Greece, Corbyn and his Socialist Campaign Group of just nine MPs were finally roused to act.

“Disillusionment” with Labour’s acceptance of the Tory austerity plans had meant many people “didn’t vote in the election,” he has said, arguing that this can be changed by Labour “returning to our principles.”

Corbyn has received backing from many Constituency Labour Parties. But his most significant support is from the trade union bureaucracy. Unite—Britain’s largest union—was the first of several to ditch its expected support for Andy Burnham in favour of Corbyn.

To some, the unions’ support for a “left” candidate may appear contradictory. The trade unions have presided over the greatest decline in workers’ wages since the 1870s. Social inequality has skyrocketed, especially after the 2008 economic crash, and as successive Labour and Conservative-led coalition governments imposed wage cuts and freezes, privatisations and massive spending cuts. The unions have responded by systematically demobilising opposition, betraying one struggle after another.

But the union bureaucracy has seen the writing on the wall. Aware that broad layers now see Labour as a Tory Party Mark Two, they fear the political consequences. To this end, the union bureaucracy is calling for a slight reflation of the economy through a form of quantitative easing, such as that carried out in the United States by the Obama administration, as an alternative to any measures to redistribute wealth or encroach on the profit drive of the major corporations.

Corbyn has secured the services of Richard Murphy, an economic adviser to the Trades Union Congress and a long-time personal associate. Murphy has called for a “people’s quantitative easing,” presided over by the Bank of England, which would fund a national investment bank to make money available for capital projects such as housing, road building and green technologies. Money for this project is supposed to come solely through a more efficient collection of corporate taxes. When asked about

the prospect of raising taxes on business, Corbyn meekly suggested that the present rate of 20 percent should not be abandoned.

Murphy stressed to the *Financial Times*, “People’s QE is necessary only if [Conservative Chancellor] George Osborne’s plan comes off the rails pretty fast.” He cited 2020 as a possible date for its implementation, arguing that “China’s currency devaluation” or “something else” is “likely to export deflation, to prick the housing bubble and to prick the investment bubble.”

Notwithstanding the use of the prefix “People’s,” this is not a policy to address the desperate plight of millions of workers and youth. It is a back-up plan to try and safeguard British capitalism in the event of a new global economic catastrophe.

In this same spirit, Corbyn has reassured the media that he has no intention of reinstating the reformist Clause IV of the Labour Party constitution committing the party to social ownership of the commanding heights of the economy. A spokesperson said he did not want “a big ‘moment’ such as that... He says we need some forms of public ownership in some cases, such as rail... His leadership would be the opposite of top-down changes.”

Corbyn describes his economic plan as the sort of “not particularly radical” policies that Germany “has been doing for a very long time.”

His embrace of the “German model” is another key reason the unions are lining up behind Corbyn. It is one based on a corporatist alliance between government, business and the trade unions to lower the wages and conditions of the working class, as exemplified in Berlin’s leading role in imposing savage austerity on Greece. With the Conservatives proposing yet another raft of anti-union measures, leaders such as Len McCluskey of Unite fear their lucrative positions as industrial policemen are under threat and are looking to Corbyn to guarantee their continuation.

Corbyn, Syriza and the pseudo-left

The most telling refutation of illusions in Corbyn is to be found in an examination of the political tendencies he has said he wishes to emulate—Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

Corbyn has cited them favourably as models for an anti-austerity movement in the UK, but one to be implemented through the Labour Party. “I have been in Greece, I have been in Spain,” he told the *Daily Mirror*. “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 remarks were made little more than two weeks after Syriza repudiated the landslide “no” vote against austerity in the July 5 referendum and agreed to cuts far more onerous than those implemented by the previous right-wing coalition.

Events in Greece must serve as a warning to working people throughout Europe. Syriza is a bourgeois party, led by ex-Stalinists and various pseudo-left tendencies, which has used populist rhetoric to impose the diktats of the Greek and European bourgeoisie. Podemos is, if anything, to the right of Syriza.

The main instrument in covering for Syriza in Greece and encouraging illusions in the supposedly socialist character of the Corbyn campaign is Britain’s pseudo-left.

One of the main achievements of Corbyn’s long political career is the extensive network of relations he has built up with the Green Party, the Communist Party of Britain (for whom he writes regularly in the *Morning Star*) and the pseudo-left groups, through such umbrella organisations as the Coalition of Resistance. The purpose of all these organisations has

been to channel opposition back behind the Labour Party and the trade unions.

Unabashed by having acted as cheerleaders and apologists for Syriza, they now offer the same service to Corbyn and a Labour Party that they had, at least rhetorically, insisted should be replaced by a new “workers party.”

Their rhetoric has been amended to leave open the possibility of Corbyn either reinvigorating the Labour Party or, should he be expelled, acting as the focus for a “British Syriza.”

One such organization, Left Unity, was founded in 2013, supposedly to provide a left alternative to Labour. It is the brainchild of Alan Thornett, the leader of Socialist Resistance, which is affiliated to the Pabloite United Secretariat. It is backed by film director Ken Loach.

It has taken less than a month for the organisation to abandon its pose of opposition to Labour. Corbyn’s candidacy provided the occasion for Left Unity to urge its members to join the party, with Loach among those who signed up only to be excluded by Labour’s vetting committee.

On August 8, Left Unity’s executive committee passed a motion acknowledging that “some of its members will view joining the Labour Party as the avenue for supporting this new [anti-austerity] movement.” It duly recognised “a pressing need” for work “inside and outside the Labour Party” and created a new “friends of Left Unity” category to this end.

They will join a smaller entryist faction grouped around the web site Socialist Action. One of Corbyn’s chief advisors is Simon Fletcher, who previously worked as one of four Socialist Action members playing a key role in then-London Labour Mayor Ken Livingstone’s administration. After Livingstone lost the 2008 mayoral election, Fletcher received a handsome payoff before moving on to act as trade union adviser to ex-Labour leader Ed Miliband. He is now Corbyn’s campaign director.

Then there is the Socialist Party (SP), formerly known as the Militant tendency, which operated for 35 years as a faction in the Labour Party, claiming that Labour could be transformed into a vehicle for socialism. Given Labour’s right-wing evolution, it was forced to abandon entry work in the early 1990s. After Blair’s junking of Clause IV, it called for a new party based on the trade unions.

The July 27 edition of the *Socialist* now declares that if Corbyn “is victorious, it would be a real step forward and, in effect, the formation of a new party.” Should the right wing respond with expulsions or a split, the Socialist Party promises to acknowledge him as the de facto “anti-austerity leader” of a new party made up of “all those who have voted for him,” along with “the many trade unions—including non-affiliated unions... which support his programme.”

The only union not affiliated to the Labour Party that has backed Corbyn is the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT). Under the leadership of the now deceased Stalinist Bob Crow, the RMT joined with the SP to form the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition electoral front. The SP is, in effect, declaring that it will continue to work under the discipline of the RMT in its efforts to restore Labour’s political credibility.

Above all else, what has been proved by the bitter experience made by Greek workers with Syriza is that it is impossible to defend anything—jobs, wages, essential social services—without breaking the stranglehold of the financial oligarchy over economic and political life. It demands the independent political mobilisation of the working class against the major corporations and banks and their government—which Greece has also proved will stop at nothing to safeguard their interests, even if this means destroying a country and plunging millions into abject poverty.

Corbyn offers no such struggle. Should he win the leadership of the Labour Party, or become the focus of a political regroupment of the pseudo-left, he will betray all of those who voted for him just as surely as did Alexis Tsipras of Syriza.

The issue placed before the working class is not a return to the Labour

Party or the fashioning of a new pro-capitalist formation that employs socialism purely as a rhetorical trick, but the building of a genuine socialist and internationalist party of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact