

UK Labour leader Corbyn, addressing Trades Union Congress, makes first policy speech

Chris Marsden
16 September 2015

Newly elected British Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn made his first major policy speech Tuesday, speaking before the annual convention of the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

His statements denouncing austerity and pledging opposition to welfare cuts, the benefit cap and the Conservative Party's new anti-strike legislation were in marked contrast to the use of this occasion by his predecessors, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, to announce or defend their latest right-wing policies.

Corbyn spoke for a little over 15 minutes. He accused the government of being "poverty deniers," declaring, "Austerity is actually a political choice that this government has taken and they're imposing it on the poorest and most vulnerable." He said Labour would try to remove the Tories' welfare benefits cap—£23,000 in London and £20,000 in the rest of England and Wales—and the planned cut to child tax credits.

He also pledged to oppose the Trade Union Bill, which will impose a 50 percent threshold for participation in strike ballots and a 40 percent threshold for stoppages involving essential public services, which he denounced as a declaration of "war on organised labour." He said he would repeal the law if Labour took office.

What was politically most significant in his speech was the central focus he placed on renewing the alliance between Labour and the trade unions as the central axis of an anti-austerity, anti-Tory agenda. Whereas Blair famously stressed Labour's "independence" from the trade unions as proof that the Labour Party was a loyal servant of the banks and corporations, Corbyn came to pledge himself to a renewed alliance in furtherance of winning the 2020 general election.

He began by citing his past role as an official in the

now-defunct National Union of Public Employees and described himself as a lifelong trade unionist. He wanted input from the unions in formulating policy, he said. "Let's do things differently and do them together," he declared. Labour had to set out a vision for "a better society," which would be advanced by means of "proud campaigning" with the unions.

A Labour leader should always address the TUC conference, he said, because "I see it as an organic link." Labour needed to work together with the unions to "change minds and change politics," he stressed. Trade union solidarity was not a "thing of the past," and the unions' influence was felt not just in the workplace, but throughout society, he added.

For Corbyn to assign such a progressive role to the trade unions flies in the face of political realities as they have been experienced by almost two generations of workers. In the UK, the unions have presided over an almost unbroken series of betrayals and defeats since the 1984-85 miners' strike, losing around half their membership as they marched in lock-step with the rightward, pro-business lurch of Labour. It is because of this that the working class has suffered such a devastating decline in its living standards.

Dave Prentis of Unison, Sir Paul Kenny of the GMB, Mick Cash of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union and Matt Wrack of the Fire Brigades Union all praised Corbyn's speech. The latter two organisations disaffiliated from Labour in protest at its disdain for the unions and embrace of privatisation. Both are reportedly considering re-affiliation moves at their conferences next year. They are among those unions that donated a few hundred thousand pounds to Corbyn's election campaign.

If these and other trade union leaders find merit in Corbyn's offer of a renewed political alliance, it is not

from the standpoint of opposing austerity measures, but securing the role they have historically played as industrial policeman on behalf of the banks and major corporations. This task is facilitated by rhetorical pledges of concern for the fate of working people—under conditions of the rising social and political opposition manifested in Corbyn’s victory—so long as this does not imply organising genuine industrial and political opposition against the ruling class.

Others at the TUC made clear their discomfort or outright opposition to Corbyn’s victory, which they see as arousing expectations of a fight-back amongst their members, whom they will find more difficult to control. Some, invariably anonymously, expressed displeasure at Corbyn’s appointment of John McDonnell as chancellor of the exchequer, with a “senior union official” quoted by BuzzFeed saying he was a “terrible choice,” a “relic of the past and too hard-line ... It just sends out the wrong message.”

Another union official, commenting on Corbyn’s speech, told the *Daily Telegraph*, “That was f..cking awful. The only thing missing were statistics on wheat harvests and tractor production.”

Most significant were the comments of TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady in her opening address to the congress. Deriding the support engendered by Corbyn’s campaign, which has seen hundreds of thousands join or affiliate to Labour, she declared, “A political party has to be a good deal more than a fan club,” and “must reach well beyond its own ranks and appeal to the country at large.”

Her language intentionally echoed the claim of the right wing that Corbyn’s policies are unpopular outside of Labour’s immediate periphery. This was accompanied by an insistence that Corbyn maintain “membership unity” (i.e., unity with the right wing), and ensure that Labour retain “a higher collective purpose beyond that of any one individual, or any one constituency of interest,” by which she meant retaining its loyalty to big business.

Echoing the language of Blair, she added, “Labour’s purpose is clear, to deliver wealth and opportunity to the many and not the few, but that means winning a general election to deliver it.”

O’Grady’s response to the new anti-strike bill was to author a September 10 op-ed column for the

Guardian jointly with Vince Cable, the former business secretary in the 2010-2015 Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition.

In it, they boasted of how, thanks to the efforts of the trade unions, “in the 1990s and 2000s, strikes accounted for well under a million days a year.” They continued: “The trend continued under the coalition, despite strong disagreements over pay, pensions and redundancies. The 6.5 million British people who belong to a union—just over a quarter of the labour force and over half of public sector workers—withdrew their labour, on average, for one day in 15 years. By any standards, historically or in comparison with other democratic countries, Britain is remarkably strike-free.”

The main danger was that the Trade Union Bill might “ensure that where there is a deeply felt and widely shared grievance, the subsequent action is more bitter and protracted with less willingness to settle.”

Presently, they continued, “fewer than one in five ballots result in strikes.” They appealed to the Tories not to miss an opportunity “to work with unions,” noting that “Many good employers, private and public sector, work constructively with unions to raise productivity...”

O’Grady’s comments speak more truthfully of the political loyalties of the trade union bureaucracy and their hostile relationship to the working class than all of Corbyn’s allusions to a supposed golden past when they acted as defensive organisations against the employers.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact