

UK Labour Party conference begins under leadership of Corbyn

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Few conferences in recent memory will be followed as carefully as that of the UK's Labour Party, which began Sunday. It is the first to be held under Jeremy Corbyn, who won the leadership of the Labour Party in a landslide vote just two weeks ago.

Corbyn won by promising to oppose austerity and steer Labour to the left, animating several hundred thousand to sign up as Labour supporters to secure his victory. As a result of this groundswell of opposition to the Conservative government's attacks on working people and the rightward lurch of Labour under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, this year's party conference will likely see the passage of resolutions opposing privatisation and benefit cuts.

The media is filled with intense speculation about possible revolts by the Blair wing of the party, but such predictions were dampened after Peter Mandelson, Tony Blair's closest political confidante, released a private paper stating that those on the right of the party should wait for the public to form a negative view of Corbyn before attempting to oust him. They were in for a "long haul during which time the atmosphere in the party will become increasingly acrimonious at branch and constituency levels," he said.

Corbyn still faces the opposition of almost the whole of his own cabinet and the Parliamentary Labour Party. He is stressing, therefore, that conference decisions should be binding, rather than advisory as insisted upon by his opponents. No doubt, the next few days will see many conflicts, but whatever "victories" Corbyn secures will be pyrrhic given his refusal to contemplate a struggle to drive the right wing out of the party.

The Blair and Brownites are a despised and hated minority. But they have the backing of the ruling class, the media and the Tories in the fight to discredit and drive out Corbyn and his supporters. They may

calculate that their weakened position does not allow for a frontal assault, but they will do everything and anything to maintain Labour as a pro-business and pro-war party.

Their greatest political advantage lies in the opponent they face, Corbyn. At every juncture, he stresses the political imperative of maintaining party unity at all costs, even under conditions where he is backed by many thousands of ordinary members.

His brief time at the helm has seen one political retreat after another, especially whenever he has been attacked by the media. Corbyn was attacked for not singing the national anthem at a Battle of Britain commemoration, while his shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, came under fire for making statements supportive of the IRA. In response, both issued humble apologies.

Corbyn has cancelled plans to address the Stop the War Coalition and announced his resignation as its chairman. He also announced that he will not be speaking at a conference fringe meeting alongside representatives of Sinn Féin, but will be speaking at a Labour Friends of Israel event.

Regarding policy, after initially threatening that "anti-worker" policies on the part of the European Union might lead him to campaign for an exit, he reassured the media that he now could not see a situation where that would be likely.

On scrapping the Trident nuclear submarine missile system, the much-anticipated discussion and vote will not occur after trade unions, including Labour's biggest donors, Unison and the GMB, made clear their opposition to any such move. Corbyn said he hoped to do his "persuasive best" to get other shadow cabinet members to back him in what will now be a free vote in Parliament—of which there is no chance.

A yet more significant concession is his promise of a free vote on whether to back air strikes against Syria if the Conservatives call one. Given his appointment of a shadow cabinet dominated by pro-war figures such as Hilary Benn, this would all but guarantee a “yes” vote.

By way of an apology for Corbyn’s retreats on such fundamental questions, Michael Chessum argued in the *New Statesman*, “[W]hat Corbyn needs is the growth of a mass movement against austerity, and a message of hope for people’s lives. Trident may enthuse an activist base, but it is housing, poverty and street-by-street activism that will bring about the movement we need... Corbyn needs to get back onto the front foot. That means moving back onto the terrain of social policy and economics—and quickly.”

This suggests that Corbyn’s retreats will somehow not affect his promises to oppose austerity. But that too is not the case. He has stated that his opposition to the government’s benefits cap is a personal one and subject to review by the party. More important still, he declared, “The policy is that we work within the total budget of £120 billion” dictated by the Tories.

What price then Corbyn’s stated policy of a “People’s Quantitative Easing” as a means of reflation the economy and creating jobs? McDonnell trailed his own conference speech with an exclusive interview with the *Guardian* in which he declared he would tell the Labour conference that Britain “will vote in favour of a new fiscal charter” proposed by Tory Chancellor George Osborne, which commits the government to delivering an overall budget surplus by 2019-20 and continuing to run a surplus in “normal times.”

“We accept we are going to have to live within our means and we always will do—full stop,” he said. “We are not deficit deniers.”

McDonnell claims that he would take a “radically different approach” to deficit reduction in that Labour would “ease the burden on low- and middle-income earners” and exempt spending on vital infrastructure projects. But given that any extra money is supposed to come largely from clamping down on tax avoidance, as was pledged by Syriza in Greece, along with £80 billion to £100 billion from scrapping Trident, this is a promise of “jam tomorrow” that does nothing to alleviate the suffering of millions of working people today.

McDonnell and Corbyn have, in addition, lowered

their proposed new higher income tax for the wealthy from 60 percent to 50 percent—the same level pledged by Labour under Ed Miliband.

Even if one were to accept that Corbyn is genuine in his striving to transform Labour—a party that has defended imperialism for more than a century—into an instrument that defends working people, how can this be reconciled with keeping a vicious right-wing cabal at the very heart of the party’s leadership?

His lack of seriousness on this issue only reflects the impotence of his broader political perspective. Political and social life in Britain and internationally is dictated by a super-rich elite, whose power cannot be defeated by passing a few resolutions at conference or even laws in parliament. It demands rather the systematic mobilisation of the working class in an industrial and political struggle against the major corporations and banks and their political stooges across the political spectrum.

If Corbyn is not prepared to deal with a handful of discredited party apparatchiks, who are widely despised even within Labour’s own ranks, how can he be trusted to lead what must be a life-and-death struggle against the financial oligarchy?

One week before the Labour Party conference was due to start, an anonymous serving general used the pages of Rupert Murdoch’s *Sunday Times* to threaten a mutiny in the event of the election of a Corbyn government in order to defeat its plans for Trident and defence cuts by “whatever means possible, fair or foul.”

Three days later, Corbyn finally broke his silence on this sinister development, in an interview with the *New Statesman*. But not even the threat of a coup stirred him to opposition. All he could manage was: “I don’t know who this general was and apparently he’s been told off by his superiors already, and I hope so. We live in a democracy and I think it’s surprising that somebody would make those kinds of statements.”



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