

UK Labour delegates speak on Corbyn's leadership

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to delegates to the British Labour Party conference in Brighton this week about their views on the election of Jeremy Corbyn as party leader and the prospect of his implementing his stated anti-austerity agenda.

The delegates were all nominated prior to Corbyn's victory earlier this month. However, they provide an indication of the diversity of opinions within the party. Many wished to remain anonymous, an indication of the political atmosphere that still dominates.

Those interviewed included both supporters and opponents of Corbyn. Some indicated illusions in the possibility of change, in some cases far more radical than that advanced by Corbyn, in and through the Labour Party. Some wanted a fight against the right wing. Others favoured compromise, as called for by Corbyn.

Delegates on the right are pleased that Corbyn has taken this position. They were broadly repudiated by voters in the party leadership election and have suffered a setback. Now they are looking to Blairites, including Tristram Hunt, Chuka Ummuna and others, to assemble a new leadership with the aim of replacing Corbyn as soon as possible.

One delegate said, "Corbyn's election is great. When I heard his election speech, I think he mentioned peace, equality, social justice all in the same breath. When was the last time you heard politicians say that? I think he's truly a man of conscience, a breath of fresh air.

"Time will tell what the right wing will do in the Labour Party. I like to think there will be support and unity. I think Corbyn, if anyone, is the man to unite the left, which was the biggest problem in the last election."

An older member said, "I'm not convinced until Corbyn starts doing stuff. If they get it wrong in the next three years there will never be a Labour government again as long as I live and as long as my children live.

"This is my last year coming to this conference, because when I come, I come to talk to people, and when I do, they just go, 'Oh God no. We can't let this bloke get the reins. Get him out.' I was a lone wolf in the unions. I'd fight to get the best for my guys. But they won't let you. How many people have they thrown out because they had the temerity to go onto a socialist web site?"

Another delegate said, "Corbyn is the greatest thing for this party in at least 40 years. You couldn't tell the difference between the Labour parliamentary party and the Conservatives. He has just taken the whole Labour Party and dropped it back into the centre where it should be.

"If the right wing of the party oppose this, the party members will cut their throats. When our current MPs abstained on the Tory attacks on benefits, some people were so angry they were tempted to give a map of Brighton to our MPs and ask them to please put a cross at the side of the lamppost you want to be strung from. People were that angry. They felt betrayed.

"The safety net that allows a Labour MP once selected to do exactly what he wants must be done away with. You have a whole load of Labour MPs who are basically very corrupt, have basically been betraying their constituents, betraying their party—betraying the people who voted for them—and they don't think there should be any consequences. I think there will be at best some de-selections. I think some of them will find a very happy home in the Conservative Party."

One delegate told the WSWS, "I've been in the Labour Party since 2010, after Gordon Brown lost the election. I think for a long period of time I didn't agree with the Iraq war, but I'd always voted Labour. I was annoyed about the Iraq war, and after Brown lost I thought it would be an opportunity to change the Labour Party.

"I voted Yvette Cooper as my number one choice and Corbyn as my second choice. I don't know what's going to happen in a few years though. I think the first test will be maybe the [2016] council elections and whether or not we do well under Corbyn. I think the problem with a lot of people is they want to win power, but at the same time deep within them there's a core of Labour values that Corbyn represents. The problem is can we maintain those values or do we have to sacrifice some of them in order to get into power then do what we want to do?

A delegate said: "I voted for [Blairite candidate] Liz Kendall. You've got to respect the fact that Jeremy Corbyn had a huge mandate. He was the right candidate at the right time for a lot of people, and, I mean, I don't agree with him at all. I think the Labour Party has kind of turned in on itself and is looking inward and elected a candidate that makes the party feel better about itself, rather than someone who is necessarily the best

guy to win the election.

“The conference has been very weird. There’s been a lot of people sort of asking, ‘God, how’s this happened and what do we do about it now?’ Not just anti-Corbyn people, but even his supporters. There are a lot of MPs who respect the fact that he won and will let him get on with governing, but don’t want anything to do with it and will make it as difficult as they can for him.

“I think there’s two ways of going about it. There’s one which is trying to destabilise him, which is sort of undermining and constant sniping with the aim of getting rid of him. And then there are people like Tristram [Hunt] and Chuka [Ummuna], who have said, ‘The Labour Party has chosen its leader and we’re going to respect that, but at the same time just as Corbyn has spent the last 32 years opposing leaders and standing up for what he believes, now it’s time for us to do the same.’

“If you look at what he’s said already, he’s already backtracked on quite a lot of things, and there are those behind him who say he’s sold out, and there are those who say that’s just sensible governing. Because he does lead a divided party, and, like any leader, he has to make compromises, and I think he’s done that. And for someone like me that’s quite pleasing.”

Another delegate said, “I joined just before the general election, on May 5. I voted for Andy Burnham. Now that Jeremy is here we have to get behind him, otherwise we will be a weak party if we are divided. Unity is important.

“I think the Labour Party is forcing him to compromise, but I think that’s good. I think that’s part of the reason why he has such a diverse shadow cabinet, so that he can be challenged in what he thinks.”

“Initially I was glad that Jeremy Corbyn was included on the ballot papers,” a delegate told the WSWs, “but I was one of those who supported Andy Burnham. With Corbyn having won and with such a decisive mandate, I think it’s up to all of us—even those who didn’t support him originally—to come together and recognise that a lot of the things that we have been saying hitherto have been, as they say, ‘Tory Lite.’

“One of the things I found most confusing and frustrating was them saying they were going to make cuts, but not as many cuts as the Tories. So we have to be clear as to what we’re not going to cut and how we’re going to get the money.

“The challenge is going to be for Jeremy to resist. It won’t just be the Tories that we are fighting, it will be the press. The press and big business have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. It will only support a Labour Party that moves away from the right a bit and is not really upsetting the status quo too much.”

Another delegate said, “A lot of people have come out of this conference feeling like they’re back in the Labour Party. Many either retreated from party affairs or actually left over Iraq. I personally left over Iraq and then rejoined when Ed Miliband

became leader.

“People are blown away by the fact that Corbyn has stuck to his principles and said exactly what a lot of us want to hear today. I think his was a brilliant speech. It was about how he was going to defend people on benefits, migrants and refugees, working people, with the new threats to workplace unions, and what people can do to defend jobs and conditions.”

“I joined the Labour Party as soon as Jeremy Corbyn was nominated,” a delegate told the WSWs. “I voted Labour all my life. I cheered when Tony Blair came to power in 1997. Then I watched with horror as Tony Blair dragged the Labour Party into virtually becoming the Tory party.

“Then the election for leader came up and Jeremy Corbyn got nominated and I thought, I’ve got to take positive action now.

“Jeremy is now giving us back the balance that the Labour Party needs. I was out in Qatar during the first Gulf War. I saw what was happening out there. I know the lies that were told. I was in Kuwait in 1992. I saw the devastation that was created by the Iraqis in Kuwait. I also know for a fact that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 1992. So in 2003, when Tony Blair launched the illegal war, was when all my faith in the Labour Party completely disappeared.

“The one thing I find absolutely disgusting is the way that the Labour Party has behaved during this election. They have proved to everybody that they are not united. The Pink Conservatives and Gravy Train Politicians, as I call them, are determined to maintain the status quo. The Parliamentary Labour Party [PLP] are plotting to stab Jeremy in the back. The media are 100 percent against him.

“I think that the Labour Party will find that the membership will support Jeremy because the membership has increased since Jeremy came to power. I think the PLP will be booted out. They have to be.”



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