

Labour's Oldham by-election victory and Corbyn's refusal to fight the right wing

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Thursday's Oldham West and Royton by-election in the northwest of England saw Labour's candidate Jim McMahon win 62.2 percent of the vote, up from 54.8 percent in May. The UK Independence Party trailed in second place on 23.3 percent.

Labour won the election by a majority of more than 10,000 votes, increasing its share of the vote by 7 percent from May's general election. The ruling right-wing Conservatives saw their share of the vote halved to 9.3 percent, while their 2010-2015 governing partners, the Liberal Democrats, lost their deposit receiving just 1,024 votes.

For weeks, Britain's media proclaimed that the by-election in the northwest of England would be the acid test of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party.

Oldham was the first important national election contest since he won the leadership of the party in September in a landslide victory, after campaigning on an antiwar and anti-austerity ticket. With the overwhelming support of hundreds of thousands of Labour members and supporters, he trounced his three Blairite challengers.

The media declared that this was all the result of a semi-putsch by the "Corbynistas"—an unrepresentative group of left activists. Oldham would be the first occasion where the "real general public", "traditional Labour voters" or, alternatively and in explicitly racial and racist language, "the white working class" could register its hostility and rejection of Corbyn's "Trot", "lefty" dreams—proving once-and-for all that Labour is unelectable under his leadership and must be replaced.

Making this result more important still for the ruling class, the vote in Oldham was held just one day after the vote in Parliament for British military air strikes in Syria. Corbyn and anyone else who opposed air strikes were denounced by Prime Minister David Cameron as

"terrorist sympathisers".

Now the voters of Oldham would be able to echo the disgust felt by Cameron and prove that Labour must turn once again to the "sensible" right-wing pro-war cabal of 66 MPs who voted with the Tories, possibly replacing Corbyn with Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn.

Both the Tories and the anti-immigrant, anti-European UKIP fought their campaign on the basis that Corbyn's policy of opposing war in Syria meant he was a threat to "national security." UKIP went as far as to release a "wanted man" window poster with a photo of Corbyn and the words "SECURITY RISK" emblazoned on it in capital letters.

On the morning of the election, the *Daily Mail* was counting down the hours to what it had described as Corbyn's "Waterloo" moment. "Tonight will deliver the first proper electoral verdict on Mr. Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, it wrote, adding, "It is also a timely reassessment of [UKIP leader] Nigel Farage's aspirations to make UKIP a credible alternative to Labour in the urban North of England." There was "no doubt" that Labour's majority "will be slashed", it confidently trumpeted.

As the polls closed, the *Sun* described Corbyn's supporters in the Labour Party as a "moronic Marxist mob" who had denounced Benn as a "warmonger instead of feting him as a hero." Voters "are repulsed" by such attacks on Benn, it added. "By the time you read this, we will know what those in Oldham think of it."

The liberal *Guardian* waded in, commenting that Labour's candidate "McMahon had to contend with Corbyn's unpopularity among many voters, particularly the white working class targeted by UKIP."

Dan Hodges, a Blairite who writes in the

Conservative *Daily Telegraph*, cited a “northern MP” who said, “The white working class vote is haemorrhaging. And it’s haemorrhaging in our heartlands.”

Sophy Ridge, the “Senior Political Correspondent” for Sky TV, said Wednesday that she had met UKIP leader “Nigel Farage pounding the aisles at Tommyfield Market, in the centre of Oldham’s shopping district.” Ridge predicted, “If the outspoken shoppers and store holders at the market are anything to go by, UKIP should win this seat.”

What then could possibly go wrong?

Britain’s odious media serves as both an echo chamber and propaganda mouthpiece for a despised ruling elite. And neither the media nor their paymasters has any basis of popular support in society or any real understanding of how out of touch and hated they are.

In Oldham, this attempt to manufacture public opinion came into headlong collision with actual public opinion.

The by-election proved that there is a clear shift to the left in the thinking of workers and young people who are angered by the destruction of their livelihoods and deeply concerned at the growing war danger in the Middle East and internationally. Far from Corbyn being the pariah they would like him to be, it is the Tories and the Blairite wing of the Labour Party who are hated and despised for the political crimes they have committed.

For this very reason, the Oldham by-election result is an indictment of Corbyn for his refusal to wage a political struggle to expel his right-wing opponents from the Labour Party.

Corbyn is betraying the very antiwar sentiment and hostility to the ruling elite that his election as party leader reflected. Since the moment he became leader he has done nothing but retreat in the face of his opponents. The nadir of this was in Wednesday’s vote on war in which he gave the Labour right a “free vote”—meaning they would not be censured or disciplined in any way for supporting war. This resulted in 66 Labour MPs backing military action, granting the Tories the significant majority they politically required to start bombing Syria.

This again allowed the right-wing Labourite cabal to go on the offensive, claiming they were being “abused” with threats of deselection as MPs, by, in Cameron’s words, “terrorist sympathisers” supportive

of Corbyn. The right-wing press was mobilised once again, with the *Daily Express* describing those attempting to deselect Labour MPs as “hard-line socialists” and “anti-airstrikes bullies”.

Prior to the vote on war, Corbyn commissioned a vote of Labour Party members showing that 75 percent were opposed to British military action in Syria. The vote in Oldham proves that if Corbyn had backed the demand to kick the right wing out of the party, he would have won mass support not only in Labour’s ranks, but throughout the country.

Prior to allowing nearly 30 percent of Labour’s MPs to vote for war, Corbyn said those that did would have to face “consequences”. In reality, the immediate response of Corbyn and his closest supporters to calls for deselecting the party’s hated warmongers has been to oppose any action against the right wing.

In a letter to party members from Corbyn and Labour Deputy Leader Tom Watson, one of the 66 MPs who voted for military action, they described calls to remove pro-war MPs as “abuse and intimidation” that “have no place in politics. And the party as a whole will not accept such behaviour, from whatever quarter it comes.”

On Thursday, Corbyn’s supporters in the Momentum group dutifully pledged, “Momentum is not a threat to MPs who voted for bombing. We have made clear that we will not campaign for the deselection of any MP and will not permit any local Momentum groups to do so.”



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