

UK Labour leader urges party not to defy Conservative spending cuts

Chris Marsden
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Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn has issued a letter instructing local Labour councils to abide by the law and impose austerity cuts demanded by the Conservative government.

The letter, signed jointly by Corbyn, his closest political ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, and Shadow Communities Secretary Jon Trickett, insists that setting an illegal budget as a response to local government cuts is not an option.

For the most part the letter reads like a legal brief, citing the 1992 Local Government Act's stipulation that councils must set a balanced budget.

"If this does not happen, i.e., if a council fails to set a legal budget, then the council's section 151 officer is required to issue the council with a notice under section 114 of the Local Government Act 1998," the letter states. "Councillors are then required to take all actions necessary to bring the budget back into balance."

The implications of this instruction are clear. At least another £9.5 billion in local authority spending cuts are planned by 2020. Corbyn is declaring that these must be made, backed up by the cynical claim that "Labour cuts" will somehow be gentler than Tory cuts.

The letter warns that not setting a balanced budget can lead to action against councillors, a judicial review and possible intervention by the secretary of state. Should this occur, "It would mean either council officers or, worse still, Tory ministers deciding council spending priorities. Their priorities would certainly not meet the needs of the communities which elected us."

How any cuts will meet community needs is not explained because no such explanation is possible. Once again, Corbyn is showing his readiness to do whatever is required to prevent a struggle that can mobilise the working class against the Tory party and Labour's right wing.

Most Labour councils will hardly need encouragement to do as he suggests. They have been imposing the cuts demanded first by the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, then by the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the decimation of vital services.

The brief anti-Tory rebellion by local authorities in the mid-1980s is an echo from a bygone era. It has been resurrected in part by the Socialist Party (SP), the successor organisation of the Militant Tendency which advocated the tactic then and did a deal with the government of Margaret Thatcher at the expense of opening a second front at the time of the 1984-85 miners' strike. All of the councils involved, except Liverpool and Lewisham, abandoned the campaign as soon as legal action was threatened.

Today, appeals to Labour councils to repeat the exercise represent a futile effort to revive the tattered left credentials of the forces grouped around Corbyn. The SP's entreaties have been duly repudiated by the leader they seek to woo.

Corbyn is far more concerned with placating the right wing than he is with opposing cuts, hoping that a stand on "unity" and "respect for the law" will appease his opponents among the MPs and trade union officials.

The letter cites McDonnell from September, shortly after Corbyn's election, insisting that there is no point in setting an illegal budget. He was so keen to reassure Britain's ruling elite that their interests were safe in his and Corbyn's hands that he advocated policies that in the event proved too openly servile for them to maintain.

He told the *Guardian* that Labour would vote in favour of the new fiscal charter proposed by George Osborne, committing future governments to an overall

surplus by 2019-20 and to running an overall budget surplus in “normal times.”

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

In the end, Corbyn felt obliged to make a show of opposition and urge a vote against Osborne’s measures. But it was in this context that McDonnell opposed any defiance by local authorities, declaring, “The situation the councils are now in is if they don’t set a budget, a council officer will do it for them. There is no choice for them anymore.”

Having made a gesture of opposition, McDonnell and Corbyn remain true to the treacherous spirit of their earlier position when it comes to political realities outside parliament.

Corbyn’s stand on budget cuts is a continuation of his betrayal of the anti-austerity and anti-war sentiment that led to his election as Labour leader, when he allowed a free vote December 2 on British participation in bombing missions in Syria. This ended with 66 Labour MPs backing military action, giving Prime Minister David Cameron the decisive majority he needed.

Corbyn marked the hundred days of his leadership of the party December 20 with a number of interviews in which he tried to burnish his anti-war credentials.

He said he was “appalled” at MPs who applauded his Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn’s speech backing air strikes in Syria. Some three weeks later, Corbyn finally states, “Parliament is supposed to be serious. It’s not a place for jingoistic cheering.”

Apparently it is.

Corbyn fails to mention that it was he who agreed to the warmonger Benn having the final word for Labour in the parliamentary debate.

He then told the Huffington Post that he “is planning to drive Labour further to the left” by polling members on their views, adding, “I’ve done that on the Syria vote ... I felt that the party members ought to have voice on this. Some were very annoyed about it, but I sent an email to every party member and we got a very large number of replies. In 36 hours we got 80,000 replies.”

Of those responding, 75 percent voted in opposition. Corbyn ignored their views and instead handed the initiative to the pro-war MPs.

Corbyn and McDonnell are now waging a campaign

against their own supporters to oppose moves to deselect the warmongers (i.e., to remove them as Labour Party nominees for the next parliamentary election). Regarding demands for the mandatory reselection of MPs, Corbyn said he has “no intention” of changing the rules. Asked whether MPs should be held accountable to their local party branches, he said, “I think we should all be accountable to our parties but I also think that accountability should be a process of engagement.”

He would encourage his critics “to share their talents with all of us, not keep it to themselves. Some people are more difficult to reach than others. They shouldn’t obsess about me.”

McDonnell was not so ambiguous. He told BBC Radio 4 that there is “no way” any Labour MPs will face deselection. “Almost on a daily basis, I’m saying there is no way there are going to be deselections and we would not support them,” he told the PM programme. “Quite the reverse—we want people back involved.”

He made a point of urging right-winger Chuka Umunna to “come back,” before adding, “I’m hoping all of them will play a role because a lot of lessons have got to be learned by all of us really.” Umunna is one of those who Labour’s right are considering as a potential leadership challenger against Corbyn.



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