

UK Labour leader Corbyn stakes his future on vote to remain in EU

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Jeremy Corbyn is attempting to position himself as the key figure defending Britain's continued membership of the European Union.

Last Thursday, the Labour Party leader delivered a keynote address before selected activists and reporters at the Institute of Engineering Technology in London in which he sought to distance himself and Labour from the damaging association with the Conservative government of Prime Minister David Cameron in the Remain campaign. On the same day, Cameron was given a hostile reception by audience members in a Sky TV debate.

But Corbyn trod a fine line, basing his criticisms of the Tories largely on their role in blocking supposedly progressive EU measures and portraying them as the real guilty party in the imposition of austerity and other attacks on working people that the Leave campaign blames on Brussels.

He began by taking an even-handed swipe at “myth-making and prophecies of doom” dominating the campaign, citing Chancellor George Osborne for warning of a recession in the event of an exit from the EU. “A vote to Leave means a Conservative Government would then be in charge of negotiating Britain's exit,” he warned, saying that would be “a disaster for the majority of people in Britain.”

For the most part, his speech was a hymn of praise for all that is “positive” in the European Union, combined with the claim that the EU could be reformed “if there was a radical, reforming government to drive that agenda” alongside allies in Europe.

Among the manifold benefits bestowed by the EU, according to Corbyn, were clean beaches, restrictions on pesticides that kill bees, measures against air pollution, the encouragement of renewable energy, the termination of mobile phone roaming charges, human rights legislation, the protection of speech and press freedom, 28 days paid leave, equal rights for part-time workers,

guaranteed maternity leave and “decent rights at work.”

Only then did he make “the Labour case for reform” of the EU “in alliance with our allies across the continent.” That case consisted of a second shopping list, including the strengthening of workers' rights across Europe, a ban on the undercutting of wages, an end to pressure to privatise public services, a collective approach to “the challenges posed by migration and the refugee crisis,” the democratisation of EU institutions and “reforms to ensure we generate prosperity across Europe to the benefit of all.”

It all sounded wonderful or at least highly promising—a presentation that required Corbyn to virtually ignore the reality of EU-imposed austerity and escalating militarism. To the extent these realities were acknowledged, it was in the context of pledges by Corbyn to fight for economic protectionist measures. These included urging Cameron to support reform of the Posting of Workers Directive “to close a loophole that allows workers from one country to work in another and be paid less than local workers.”

He also pledged to veto adoption of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the trade deal being negotiated between the United States and the EU, which, Corbyn charged, would open up public services to “further privatisation” and “make privatisation effectively irreversible,” as well as allowing “corporations to sue national governments if regulations impinged on their profits.”

The Labour leader offered a rebuttal of the xenophobic attacks on EU migration by the Leave campaign while studiously avoiding opposition to Cameron's intended restrictions on benefits for migrants, an anti-immigrant measure negotiated with the EU as part of the Remain program. He stressed that “some industries are affected by the undercutting of wages,” and “some communities can change dramatically and rapidly and that can be disconcerting for some people.” He continued: “That

doesn't make them Little Englanders, xenophobes or racists. More people living in an area can put real pressure on local services like GPs surgeries, schools and housing.”

However, “This isn't the fault of migrants,” but of “unscrupulous employers” and “a failure of government.”

Even these careful and circumscribed efforts to distance himself and Labour from the Tories earned Corbyn the ire of his party's right wing and the media. The *Financial Times* wrote that he had, by claiming that Treasury forecasts about the dire consequences of a vote to leave were “histrionic hype” and “myth-making,” carried out what one “colleague” described as “deliberate sabotage.”

The *Financial Times* went on to say that Corbyn's statement that “the biggest risk of recession in this country is from a Conservative government” was “an implicit criticism of other Labour figures who have stood shoulder to shoulder with Tory ministers in recent weeks to present a united front against Brexit.” The newspaper continued: “They include Ed Balls, former shadow chancellor; Alistair Darling, former chancellor; and Sadiq Khan, mayor of London.”

David Miliband, Tony Blair's favoured successor and a former foreign secretary, insisted that Corbyn should share a platform with Cameron as he had, adding, “Where centre-right and centre-left agree, we should say so.”

BBC political editor Laura Kuenssberg, who has repeatedly demonstrated her hostility to Corbyn, stated that he had, as part of his “Remain and Reform” agenda, listed “almost as many downsides with the EU as positives.”

BBC deputy political editor John Pienaar wrote of “mutinous grumbling among backbenchers” who, “if this referendum ends in the momentous outcome of a vote to leave,” will “cast wrathful glances in the direction of their leader.”

On behalf of the trade unions, the new leader of the GMB, Britain's third-largest union, Tim Roache, told Kuenssberg that he viewed the Labour leader as “a half-hearted Remain.”

The pseudo-left groups in the UK are divided over the EU. They either utilise Corbyn's position to justify their own support for a Remain vote, or, in the case of the advocates of Left Leave, bemoan his missed opportunity to create a crisis for Cameron and the Tories and hasten the election of a Labour government.

Both positions conceal Corbyn's real motivations. He is not adopting either a correct or false tactical position over how best to defend the interests of the working class.

Rather, he is toeing the line dictated to him by the dominant sections of British imperialism, who see membership of the EU trade block as essential for securing their economic interests and for the ability of the NATO military alliance to function effectively against Russia and China.

This is clearly demonstrated by his chosen allies in seeking the reform of the EU. Corbyn made much of his talks with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, the leader of Syriza, who was “elected on a clear anti-austerity platform to resolve his country's financial crisis.” Although Greece has suffered from austerity, he said, “the Greek president and the Greek people are clear that their country wants to stay within a reformed Europe.”

Tsipras betrayed the mandate he had been given to oppose austerity and is instead imposing the attacks demanded of him, precisely in the name of maintaining Greek membership of the EU. Greek workers have mounted four general strikes against his government since last November.

On the TTIP, Corbyn stated that his position was the same as French President Francois Hollande, who had said he too “would veto the deal as it stands.” Hollande's Socialist Party government is presently the target of mass working class opposition, due to its imposition of labour legislation expanding the normal work week to 46 hours, making it easier to sack people, and limiting the right to strike. The labour “reform” was pushed through parliament in the face of a wave of strikes and protests involving millions of workers and youth, which were met by the government with brutal police repression.

Notwithstanding Corbyn's pallid left posturing, a Labour government he headed would adopt the same hostile position towards the working class as those of Tsipras and Hollande.



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