

Britain's Labour shadow chancellor seeks to appease anti-Corbyn coup plotters

Julie Hyland
2 July 2016

In a speech to business leaders Friday, John McDonnell, Labour's shadow chancellor, called on the party to unite to prepare the basis for Britain's exit from the European Union.

His appeal for unity was an oblique reference to the right-wing putsch underway against party leader Jeremy Corbyn, in which most of the Labour shadow cabinet has resigned and the media has launched a ferocious campaign demanding that Corbyn stand down.

Virtually every part of the party machinery is now in open revolt against Corbyn and the 60 percent of party members and supporters who elected him to head the party just nine months ago. Earlier this week, the parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) agreed a no-confidence motion by 172 to 40, and more than 60 shadow cabinet members have resigned in a bid to force Corbyn out.

More than half of Labour's 24 members of the Scottish Parliament have signed a statement calling on him to consider his position. A majority of Labour's 20 members of the European Parliament have sent a letter demanding he stand down, and 540 Labour councillors have posted a letter on the LabourList web site rejecting his leadership.

McDonnell made clear that neither he nor Corbyn would mount any real political challenge to this right-wing offensive. He specifically rejected any moves to deselect MPs involved in the putsch, saying that differences should be resolved "by democratic means" and "amicably," so that the party could "come back together."

The main task facing Labour, he argued, was to draw up an economic blueprint to prepare for Britain's exit from the EU. Referring to the 52 percent vote in favour of the Leave camp in the June 23 referendum, he indicated that Labour would not be part of parliamentary attempts (the majority of MPs were in favour of Remain) to veto a Brexit. "The people have spoken and their decision must be respected," he said.

Labour accepted that this meant freedom of movement of EU citizens to the UK would end, he acknowledged. "Let's be absolutely clear on the immigration issue. If Britain leaves the European Union, the free movement of people, of labour, will then come to an end," he declared. Labour would try only to ensure that the rights of EU nationals currently working in the UK—and UK nationals working in the EU—would continue after exit.

The main plank of Labour's "red lines" for a Brexit was ensuring access to the European single market, McDonnell said, adding that this was especially so in regard to maintaining the "passporting" status enjoyed by UK financial institutions, which enables unrestricted trade within the EU.

"While there is a need for fundamental reform for the City, neither should we just allow it to sink beneath the waves," he said, referring to Britain's City of London banking centre.

McDonnell's pro-business pledges and pleas for Labour's right wing to "calm down" for the sake of the party will achieve nothing. The right wing has been preparing to overturn Corbyn's election since the day he won the party leadership contest, but it is the Brexit vote that provided the trigger for the current frontal attack. The claim is that despite his official support in the referendum for remaining in the European Union, Corbyn sabotaged the campaign for a Remain vote in line with his previous history of opposition to the EU. McDonnell's indication that Labour will not try to prevent a Brexit will only further antagonise Corbyn's opponents.

The coup is being coordinated with the security services in Britain and the United States, which regard the Leave result as a threat to NATO and its military and geostrategic agenda, above all its aggressive drive against Russia. With all the frontrunners in the Conservative Party leadership contest committed to British withdrawal, having ruled out any prospect of a second referendum or

an early general election, the highest echelons of the state have determined that a refashioned Labour Party is the best means of reversing the Leave vote.

An early day motion presented to parliament by Labour's Geraint Davies and Jonathan Edwards of Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales) calls for a second referendum on the terms agreed for a British exit from the EU. Writing in the *Guardian*, the house organ for the coup, Davies argued, "Democracy is meant to reflect the settled view of the people after an informed choice." But many were not prepared for the "shock" result. Up to 1.1 million Leave voters regretted their decision, he said, citing a Survation opinion poll. As a result, "the margin of victory" in the referendum could be "theoretically" overturned "by declared switchers in another vote."

Davies accepted that the referendum could not be rerun, but insisted that "people have the right to vote on the UK exit package negotiated with the EU" and "choose between accepting the UK exit package on offer or remaining in the EU."

Writing in the Conservative *Daily Telegraph* Friday, former prime minister Tony Blair argued that Remain voters were "disenfranchised, without a natural political home and, at least under Labour's present leadership, alienated from either main political party."

With the "nation in peril," he wrote, the question was how "to unite; how to protect and advance the UK's national interest; and specifically what is the right future relationship with Europe."

The government had to delay invoking Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, which triggers negotiations on the UK's withdrawal from the EU, until there was agreement on Britain's "red lines" and a "detailed vision" from the Leave leadership of "what the new British economy they advocate really means."

Blair continued, "Above all, Britain should keep all our options open." This was "not an argument for another referendum," he stated, but then added, "Actually, the people do have a right to change their mind, but that is not for now."

At this point, there appears to be little agreement within the right wing on how to effect their plans. Deputy Labour leader Tom Watson has called on MPs not to mount a challenge for leadership while he tries to get a "negotiated settlement" with Corbyn's closest advisers that Corbyn stand down "voluntarily," the *Guardian* reported Friday evening.

Former shadow business secretary Angela Eagle has already delayed announcing her leadership bid out of

concern that in the event of another contest, Corbyn might win again. A YouGov survey showed Corbyn retained the backing of a majority of Labour members, especially in comparison with any of his potential challengers. Eagle supported the Iraq war in 2003. She is just one of a number of Labour MPs expected to be criticised when the final report on the inquiry into the Iraq war, under Sir John Chilcot, is published next week.

A further 60,000 new members have reportedly joined Labour in the last week, many of them thought to be pro-Corbyn, although the right wing is also attempting to mobilise support.

Labour's National Executive Committee is expected to rule soon on whether, in the event of a leadership contest, Corbyn should automatically go on the ballot. He does not have the support of the required number of MPs and MEPs to stand if it rules against.

Whatever the specific manoeuvres chosen, what is underway is the preparation of the political mechanisms required by the bourgeoisie to enforce its interests against the working class.

With senior Labour figures, including former shadow cabinet members Owen Smith (a potential leadership challenger) and Seema Malhotra, threatening a split if Corbyn is not removed, Liberal Democrat leader Tim Farron left open the possibility of forming a new party with Labour's right wing.

The referendum cut across party divisions, he said. "I shared a platform with many people I won't embarrass by naming," he added, leading to the discovery that they shared "more in common than just our belief that Britain should be in the European Union."

Leading members of the Green Party have proposed cross-party talks with the Liberal Democrats, Labour and Plaid Cymru for an alliance of "progressive parties" directed against Tory plans for an "ultra-right Brexit scenario."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact