

Leadership contest launched, raising prospect of split in UK Labour Party

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Labour MP Angela Eagle will today officially declare herself the challenger for the leadership of the UK Labour Party.

Her announcement, directed against incumbent leader Jeremy Corbyn, is a move by the party's Blairite right wing, which enjoys the support of the vast majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP).

Corbyn was elected just ten months ago with the votes of hundreds of thousands of Labour members and supporters on the basis of an anti-austerity, anti-war ticket. The attempt to remove him is a declaration by the party's MPs and their backers in the ruling elite and the media that no such policy will be tolerated.

With Labour expected to play the leading role in managing the political, economic and social fallout from the June 23 referendum vote for the UK to leave the European Union, a long-planned move against Corbyn was immediately put into operation in the referendum's aftermath.

Less than two weeks after a motion of no confidence in Corbyn was backed by 172 Labour MPs and opposed by only 40, all efforts by Corbyn, his supporters in Momentum, and Unite union leader Len McCluskey to head off a direct contest for control of the party have ended in failure.

The divorce between the PLP and the party's base is extraordinary. Since the move against Corbyn was initiated, almost 130,000 people have joined Labour, bringing the party's total membership to 515,000. The vast majority of these have joined to support Corbyn.

But instead of mobilising these forces against the PLP, Corbyn has again made "party unity" his watchword, relying on McCluskey, the leader of Britain's biggest union and Labour's main financial backer, to pressurise the party's right wing to accept a compromise based on an agreement that Corbyn would

quit before the scheduled 2020 general election.

The negotiations quickly came to nothing, even though Corbyn refrained from naming Blair a war criminal in Parliament following the publication last week of the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq war. Just three days later, Labour's deputy leader, Tom Watson, announced that negotiations with the trade unions, which had warned repeatedly of a split in the party, were at an end.

Labour's hierarchy declare that their intention is to make Labour "electable." What they mean is to make it *acceptable* to the ruling class—restoring its credentials as a trusted representative of big business, committed wholeheartedly to NATO and seeking, in alliance with the Liberal Democrats and others, to restore UK membership of the EU.

Only this can account for the depiction of Corbyn, who has offered up only the mildest of reformist measures, as the representative of a revolutionary insurgency against Labour's "traditional" values. At a meeting of the PLP, held in Corbyn's absence, former Labour leader Neil Kinnock made a speech that was subsequently widely publicised, in which he stated, "In 1918, in the shadow of the Russian Revolution, they [Labour's founders] made a deliberate, conscious, ideological choice that they would not pursue the syndicalist road, that they would not pursue the revolutionary road—it was a real choice in those days. They would pursue the parliamentary road to socialism."

Corbyn and anyone who supports him were judged by Kinnock, whose period as leader was characterised by witch-hunts, expulsions and the betrayal of the 1984 miners' strike, to be an alien revolutionary tendency that must be driven from the party.

In declaring an end to negotiations, Watson stated,

“The Labour party was founded with the explicit aim of pursuing the parliamentary path to socialism... It is clear to all that Jeremy has lost the support of the PLP with little prospect of regaining it.”

The emphasis on the PLP is necessary because the coup plotters have little or no chance of winning a leadership contest, other than by the most nakedly undemocratic means. Prior to Eagle’s announcement, her own Constituency Labour Party (CLP) in Wallasey voted to back Corbyn as leader, with 40 members voting in favour of him, none against, and just four abstentions.

Nothing is being ruled out by the PLP, including the possibility that Corbyn will not even be allowed to stand. Following the formal launch of Eagle’s campaign Monday, Labour’s National Executive Committee is scheduled to meet the following day to rule on whether Corbyn requires the support of 20 percent of Labour MPs, that is, more than 50, to stand in defence of his leadership position. The Blairites have taken legal advice that concludes that Corbyn must secure MPs’ nominations, and the National Executive, which is elected tomorrow, could rubber-stamp such a move.

However, if it decides not to keep Corbyn off the ballot, then the PLP plotters will do whatever they can to secure victory, including purges and attempts to block from voting those who joined as supporters last year or more recently as members. When questioned on ITV’s “Peston on Sunday” show about the vote against her in Wallasey, Eagle said of her own local members, “There’s a disruptive, newly joined element, many of whom were thrown out [of the Labour Party] in the 1990s, who are making a lot of noise.”

Corbyn has again responded to the challenge from the right wing with appeals for unity. On Saturday, he addressed an audience of thousands of workers and youth at the annual Durham Miners Gala but refused to refer directly to the coup against him, including Eagle’s leadership challenge, stating only, “There’s a lot of debate about what’s happening in the Labour Party at the present time,” and that he had “patience that is infinite.”

Corbyn said he was “very disappointed” in those who resigned from his shadow cabinet, noting that he had written to them thanking them for their contribution. He did not refer at all to the Chilcot report, which provided

conclusive proof that those responsible for the war, including Blair, had blood on their hands.

Speaking to ITV at Durham, he said that MPs who opposed him were “going through an interesting phase in their political debate at the present time,” adding, “I want to reach out to them and work with them.”

On the BBC’s “Andrew Marr Show” on Sunday, Corbyn said he would mount a legal challenge to any move to keep him off the ballot “because the rules of the party indicate that the existing leader, if challenged, should be on the ballot paper.” Pressed by Marr, he said that he might back a parliamentary motion moved by Conservative MP David Davis declaring Tony Blair guilty of “contempt” of Parliament because he deceived MPs while making the case for war against Iraq.

Even then, he begged his opponents for peace, stating, “I’ve reached out in the broadest way I could. I’m keen to reach out. We are going to come together, discussing how we deal with the possible UK negotiations over the next few months over the European Union.”

“There’s an awful lot of policy areas where’s there’s a great deal of agreement,” he added.

Asked by Marr if he would eventually “get rid of the MPs who oppose you” and “have mandatory reselections and get them all out,” Corbyn replied, “It’s a democratic party, not a dictatorship.”

While Corbyn speaks of discussing how to deal with EU negotiations in the Labour Party, the *Guardian* reported Saturday that a cabinet minister has said Tory and Labour MPs have held informal discussions about establishing a new political party in the event of pro-Brexit Tory MP Andrea Leadsom becoming prime minister and Corbyn staying as Labour leader.

The talks, involving “senior players” in both parties, “have discussed founding a new centrist grouping... A Tory party source said Labour and Conservative MPs who campaigned in favour [of EU membership] had become closer during the campaign and increasingly come to regard themselves as ‘a tribe.’”



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