

Leadership contest prompts mass sign-up to UK Labour Party

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Labour's leadership election campaign has opened amid a barrage of dirty tricks and slanders by the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), using a pliant media as an echo chamber.

The immediate aim is to denigrate incumbent leader Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters in the hope of maximising the vote for challenger Owen Smith. But with little chance of a Smith victory, the campaign is ultimately designed to sanction whatever anti-democratic measures are taken to either sabotage the contest or to justify a split in the event of a Corbyn victory.

Last week, in the two-day window declared by the National Executive Committee (NEC), an extraordinary 184,000 people signed up as members or union affiliates of the Labour Party—paying £25 for the right to vote in the contest.

The NEC had withdrawn the right to vote for over 300,000 sign-ups since January, who had paid £3 in order to support Corbyn while recruiting their own base of support. The right's "Save Labour" campaign claims some success, but most estimates are that a majority of new voters are with Corbyn. Moreover, new signers will vote alongside 380,000 longstanding members and an estimated 160,000 affiliated supporters from unions and other organisations who overwhelmingly back Corbyn.

Smith, the former shadow work and pensions secretary, has the backing of 162 MPs but trails 22 points behind Corbyn in opinion polls.

Blairite leadership challenger Angela Eagle this week gave way to Smith, as he was considered to be more likely to beat Corbyn as a "clean skin"—someone not directly associated with either the most right-wing excesses of Labour or the coup plot. But his claim of being "left" and "untainted" does not stand up to

scrutiny.

In 2002, he became a special adviser to Paul Murphy, the Blairite Secretary of State for Wales and followed him into the Northern Ireland Office. In 2005, Smith became Head of Policy and Government Relations for Pfizer, the pharmaceutical corporation, and in September 2008 he joined Amgen, the UK's biggest biotech firm.

Smith claims to have been a convinced opponent of the Iraq War and that he "would have voted against" if he had been in parliament. But when he was a candidate in the 2006 Blaenau Gwent by-election, he said, "I thought at the time the tradition of the Labour Party and the tradition of left-wing engagement to remove dictators was a noble, valuable tradition, and one that in South Wales, from the Spanish Civil War onwards, we have recognised and played a part in."

While working for Pfizer in 2005, Smith endorsed a report promoting greater "choice" for patients in the NHS, including focus group research on "direct payments" for some services.

He supported Private Finance Initiative (PFI) schemes, telling Wales Online, "If PFI works, then let's do it. ... I'm not someone, frankly, who gets terribly wound up about some of the ideological nuances that get read into some of these things, and I think sometimes they are totally overblown."

Speaking in a parliamentary debate on epilepsy in 2010, he called on ministers to "improve incentives" for pharmaceutical companies and warned the government to be careful about "generic substitution of drugs" in all markets in medicine.

In 2011, Smith voted in support of setting up a no-fly zone in Libya and in 2014 for air strikes in Iraq. He also supported the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons programme and has said that as prime

minister, he would authorise a nuclear strike.

Smith is the best the PLP could field only because the choice of alternatives is so rotten. Millions of working people see this. Support for Corbyn, portrayed by the right as the product of a “personality cult”, is in fact a measure of the hostility towards New Labour’s agenda of austerity, toadying before big business and embrace of militarism and war.

Every day, the party’s MPs parade their latest lying claims of “sexist” or “anti-Semitic” “intimidation” for which Corbyn is supposedly responsible. Eagle, who claimed to have been subject to an anti-gay attack at a local party meeting that she did not even attend, has accused Corbyn of “stirring”, while Smith said he was creating “a culture of bullying.”

The truth is that if not for Corbyn’s refusal to politically oppose them on the basis of preserving party unity, his critics would not have been in a position to wage their anti-democratic and filthy campaign.

On Wednesday, at a meeting to launch his election campaign, Corbyn responded to a question on whether MPs would face the prospect of mandatory re-selection by their local parties. He replied that because of the Conservative government’s plans to cut the number of parliamentary seats from 650 to 600 in 2018, all Labour MPs would face re-selection “if this parliament runs to the full term.”

Everything Corbyn said at his campaign launch made clear that his was not a threat to actually move against the right wing. Offering the “hand of friendship” to his opponents, he stressed that after the September 24 leadership election result the party must unite: “I’m very disappointed that those people resigned, often without really giving me any satisfactory explanation as to why they were resigning.”

Smith, he added, would be “very welcome” to re-join the shadow cabinet.

Corbyn’s appeals serve only to chloroform his supporters as to the nature of the enemy they face—acting instead as the last line defender of Labour’s stranglehold over the working class.

On Tuesday, the High Court will hear a legal challenge brought by millionaire Labour donor Michael Foster aimed at removing Corbyn from the Labour leadership ballot. Foster’s legal team argues that last week’s NEC split decision—secured largely by the trade union vote—to automatically include Corbyn as sitting

leader, misinterpreted conflicting legal advice. Other candidates in the election had to secure the backing of 50 MPs.

Such is the depth of the right wing’s hostility to Corbyn that both sides in court would have been represented by his opponents. The legal challenge named Labour’s General Secretary Iain McNicol as defendant—someone who wanted Corbyn to be excluded and only allowed legal opinion to this effect to be read out at the NEC. Corbyn was forced to launch a successful legal bid to get himself included as a second defendant on the basis that it was “pressing and obvious” that he was not adequately represented in the same way as other Labour members by McNicol.

Labour MPs take their orders from the ruling class and have been told in no uncertain terms to pursue their conflict to the end—up to a split and the formation of a new party if necessary.

In the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph*, James Kirkup writes, “There are wars where the two parties fight in the hope of seizing territory, righting a wrong or making a point, before settling the conflict with a deal each hopes will be advantageous to their interests. And then there is total war, when each side knows that the fight only ends in the total destruction of one side, or perhaps even both. ... This is a fight to the political death.”

Rupert Murdoch’s *Times* declares, “If Mr Corbyn is not deposed, his MPs will have no responsible option but to split from a man who is leader in name only and whose ideology is alien to the party’s and the country’s values.”

Acting on cue, one former shadow cabinet member told the *Independent*, “Most of the Parliamentary Labour Party ... will not serve under Jeremy. His position is untenable.” Another Labour MP said, “At some point before the next general election, he will go. The only question is when.”



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