

Britain's Financial Times calls on anti-Corbyn plotters to prepare Labour split

Julie Hyland**20 August 2016**

The *Financial Times* has issued its strongest call to date for a split in the Labour Party.

An editorial published August 14 appeared under the headline "Labour moderates must think before they split." However, its content was far harder than its title suggests in urging Labour "moderates" to split from leader Jeremy Corbyn.

The FT acknowledges that the right-wing orchestrated putsch against Corbyn is in trouble. Despite 172 Labour MPs calling for Corbyn to go and the barring of 130,000-plus members from voting in September's leadership contest, Corbyn looks set to be "returned as leader next month," it writes.

Given this likelihood, it admonishes those in the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) who are unsure at making the break, supposedly based on the experience with the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in the 1980s. The SDP was initiated by the "Gang of Four," Labour right-wingers Roy Jenkins, Shirley Williams, Bill Rodgers and David Owen. Complaining of "Trotskyist" infiltration, and opposed to the 1981 Labour Party conference's endorsement of unilateral disarmament and withdrawal from the European Economic Community (forerunner to the European Union—EU), they led a split from Labour to form the SDP. While their breakaway helped Margaret Thatcher consolidate her premiership in subsequent elections, by 1988 the SDP itself had split with the majority merging with the Liberal Party to form the Liberal Democrats.

The FT chastens those now hesitating over carrying through a similar split, warning, "If their challenge to Mr. Corbyn fails, moderates cannot afford to rule out a formal break. Unity at all costs is an emotional impulse, not a practical strategy."

According to the newspaper, a plan is circulating for the 172 MPs who oppose Corbyn to "resign the whip and sit as a separate party. If enough of them did so, they would become the official opposition. They could then raise members and donors among the millions of dispossessed centre-left voters," it states.

Insisting that the coup plotters must be prepared to bite the bullet, the FT stresses that they must also think "through what a new party of the centre-left would stand for" and make "serious preparation" for a breakaway.

They have two choices, the editorial suggests. Referring to the June 23 vote in favour of the UK quitting the European Union, it warns that "white working-class voters in de-industrialised regions of England" cannot be won to the kind of "liberal, pro-globalisation party that [then Labour Prime Minister] Tony Blair led a decade ago."

Hopes of reviving Blair's "election-winning alliance of low-income nativists and better-off metropolitans" would today mean adopting policies tilted to the former, it writes, and implies taking a "more sceptical line on immigration and market forces."

Under conditions in which "British politics is evolving," however, the FT suggests, "There may be another way." If the Conservative Party consolidates itself as the party of Brexit, a Labour breakaway could position itself as the party of the 48 percent who voted Remain—those overwhelmingly "young" and "in work," the FT suggests, who want the "minimum possible disruption to the nation's economic life."

"Genuine political realignments happen rarely but EU exit may yet prompt one," it writes.

The FT's editorial is in bad faith. Like the right-wing coup plotters, it portrays its support for a split as a means of saving Labour from "extinction as an electoral force," supposedly due to Corbyn's stated allegiance to socialism. In fact, the Labour Party—long rightly regarded as a right-wing big business party—has been haemorrhaging working class support for years. Its association with the criminal speculative practises that facilitated the 2008 financial crash and neo-colonialist wars such as Iraq, saw the party wiped out in Scotland and large parts of Wales and northern England—enabling the Conservatives to win two successive elections with the support of less than one-quarter of the electorate.

Corbyn's leadership bid was aimed at preventing

Labour's complete annihilation, by encouraging the illusion that the party can be transformed into a focus of social opposition based on anti-austerity and anti-militarist policies.

Such claims have had some success. Despite, or rather because of, the continuous right-wing attacks on Corbyn's leadership, Labour membership has almost trebled to 503,000. It had begun to stem its electoral decline, moreover, winning the last four by-elections with an increase in its vote in three of these, and a string of council elections and mayoral contests.

That Labour's partial revival has taken place under someone who has said that we could "learn a great deal" from Karl Marx is a distorted expression of enormous social discontent and a leftward shift among workers and youth. It is this that has made Corbyn—despite his repeated willingness to compromise with the right wing and water down his so-called "principles"—the target of a putsch.

This is especially the case in the context of the Brexit result, which presents an existential crisis for the British bourgeoisie. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the organisers of the anti-Corbyn coup, working in conjunction with the military-intelligence apparatus in Britain and the United States, are seeking to overturn the referendum result and re-fashion the Labour Party as the preferred tool to carry this out.

The FT is not alone in portraying the Brexit outcome as the result of a division between a "white, working class" baying for anti-immigrant measures and national protectionism, and young, metropolitan, pro-EU and pro-market "globalists." A section of the Labour bureaucracy, led by Jon Cruddas, is openly toying with the party's "rebirth" as the party of English patriotism, on the basis that this is the only way that it can "reconnect" with a "white working class" that has proven itself irredeemably nationalist and racist.

This is not the preferred option of the FT. The newspaper was among the first to call for Labour's refashioning as a pro-EU party, with Phillip Stephens writing hopefully following the Brexit vote that a "space may be opening up for a new, pro-European, economically liberal and socially compassionate alternative to pinched nationalism and hard-left socialism."

Its op-ed makes clear that a breakaway must work through the full consequences of such a pitch, given that Labour "would be swapping its traditional base for a new and untested one, with all the changes in policy that implies."

What all wings of the bourgeoisie agree on, however, is that the class problems facing workers and youth must be buried at all costs, and questions of "cultural" identity made the central issue.

Just how urgent this is was underscored by the fact that, in the same week the FT editorialised on the need to prepare a split in Labour, the *Economist* magazine—the other major mouthpiece of financial capital in Britain—was proselytizing on the same theme.

Columnist Bagehot had already declared that Labour should become the "strong, national voice" of the 48 percent who voted to Remain in the EU, and that if Corbyn "can be forced out, perhaps a new, moderate, pro-European leadership can reorient the party ... and, yes, if circumstances change sufficiently, floating the possibility that Britain revisit its choice of June 23rd."

He returned to his theme on August 12, fleshing out the scenario for a right-wing breakaway, in terms remarkably similar to the FT.

Envisaging that Corbyn is re-elected as Labour leader on September 24, "One-by-one, MPs start declaring their independence from their reelected leader," Bagehot writes, as Labour Party HQ staff refuse to work with Corbyn and local party branches split. This would provide the basis for the declaration of "True Labour" by "leading MPs and Labour grandes like [former party leader] Mr. [Neil] Kinnock," against Corbyn's "Labour."

The True Labour breakaway would seek and obtain recognition from the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Bercow, as Her Majesty's official opposition. It could then "swallow the moderate segments of Constituency Labour Parties and welcome a flood of new centre-left and centrist members, including many previously unaligned voters politicised by the Brexit vote."

In marked contrast to Corbyn's pleas to the right wing to preserve party unity, Bagehot is unequivocal. True Labour's role would "not be to compete amicably with Mr. Corbyn's 'Labour' but to marginalise or, ideally, destroy it," he writes.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact