

Lessons of Labour's leadership contest

The Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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The following statement is being circulated in Liverpool at today's Labour Party Special Congress and at the pro-Jeremy Corbyn movement Momentum's The World Transformed event.

Jeremy Corbyn is expected to be announced the victor over his challenger, Owen Smith, in the Labour Party leadership contest today.

His re-election will be seen by many as a triumph over the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and above all the Blairites who led the McCarthyite witch-hunt to remove him. But notwithstanding such understandable sentiment, this will prove to be a Pyrrhic victory.

The central lesson that must be drawn from Corbyn's 12 months in office is that his stated aim of transforming the Labour Party into a vehicle for mass opposition to austerity, militarism and war is a chimera. While he may remain, at this point at least, Labour leader, on all substantive issues of policy the right wing continues to hold sway.

When Corbyn first won office in September 2015, he argued that an influx of new members into the party would create the conditions for overcoming the disastrous legacy of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and reversing Labour's electoral collapse. His central contention was that Labour MPs, whatever their disagreements, were all genuinely desirous of forming a government in the interests of working people and would therefore be persuaded of the need for a more "progressive" agenda.

Instead Corbyn's "new kind of politics" was practised only by his immediate leadership team, while his opponents went on a war footing.

In the face of constant threats of rebellion by his shadow cabinet and the PLP, Corbyn responded by making one retreat after another. He appointed top Blairites to his shadow cabinet, stood down from the Stop the War coalition, allowed a free vote on military intervention into Syria and instructed Labour councils

not to defy Conservative government spending cuts. Finally, he reversed his previous opposition to the European Union, leading Labour's Remain campaign in the June 23 Brexit referendum.

None of this placated his opponents. Faced with an existential crisis for British capital opened up by the referendum Leave vote, they immediately implemented plans for his removal. The campaign waged has been vicious—including denying more than 130,000 members and supporters the right to vote, and utilising the Orwellian Compliance Unit to trawl through on-line accounts to find "evidence" of thought crimes.

The designation of this purge as "Operation Icepick", along with the routine denunciation of "Trotskyite infiltrators" is apposite, given that an historical precedent can only be found in Stalin's Russia.

Despite this, Corbyn continues to urge unity with his would-be political assassins. He has pledged to again build an inclusive leadership drawn from "all wings" of the party. The demands now being made by the right wing in return for a "conciliation" deal include proposals to rig the composition of the shadow cabinet and the National Executive Committee, and to eliminate the supporters' category so as to undermine Corbyn's base.

If Labour does not split, this will only be because the right wing have determined they need more time to mount their conspiracies. Some MPs have said they will form an alternative "shadow shadow cabinet" on the backbenches, while former Home Secretary Alan Johnson urged a relentless campaign to undermine Corbyn's leadership "year after year."

Those workers and young people who have rallied behind Corbyn in the hope that they could "recapture" Labour from the Blairites have been misled. It is the upper-middle-class clique that constitutes the PLP—and which is accountable only to the military-intelligence state apparatus—that determines Labour's class

character, not its members.

Since it was founded more than a century ago, Labour has functioned as a political defender of British imperialism. With the sole exception of the 1945 Labour government—when it was necessary to offer significant reforms to the working class in order to restore British capitalism from the ruins of world war—every single attempt to push the party to the left has been met with bans and proscriptions.

The emergence of Blair and New Labour flowed organically from Labour's role as the primary opponent of socialism in Britain. With the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, social democratic parties and trade unions the world over seized on the wave of capitalist triumphalism to abandon any connection to the working class and embrace financial speculation, an onslaught on workers' living standards and, above all, policies of militarism and war.

The moves against Corbyn's supporters underscore that the PLP will tolerate no retreat from such policies. Their actions are only a pale indication of how they will respond to the upsurge in the class struggle that is emerging from the deepening crisis of the profit system.

Corbyn knows this, but still insists he would form a government with the right wing because he represents a faction of the Labour bureaucracy, not a genuine opposition to it. He plays the same role politically as Bernie Sanders in the United States has for the Democratic Party—seeking to trap the emerging leftward movement amongst workers and youth behind Labour.

His policies have nothing to do with defending the working class, much less implementing socialism, as is claimed by his pseudo-left backers. He has described Brexit as a vote against a failed neoliberal model, but urges measures to preserve British capitalism through economic protectionism and state intervention. His proposal to encourage "social entrepreneurs", based on cooperatives, investment banks, credit unions and the like, are intended to shore up Labour's base in a section of the middle class.

This accounts for the support Corbyn receives from groups such as the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party and the Alliance for Workers Liberty. Contrary to their designation by the right-wing media as "Trots", these organisations constitute a professional *anti-*

Trotskyist detachment of the petty bourgeoisie—drawn from the trade union bureaucracy, academics, journalists, local government and parliamentary functionaries who seek to defend their privileges by preserving the existing social and political order. The glorification of Corbyn's Labour Party is only the latest example of their holding up of bourgeois parties, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, as an alternative to a genuinely independent movement of the working class. In every case this ends in political betrayal.

The issue posed before workers and youth is not who leads the Labour Party, but the building of a new workers' party based on a programme of socialist internationalism. Under conditions of a worsening global economic crisis and growing inter-imperialist antagonisms that threaten a new world war, only a party that aims at the unification of the international working class in a common struggle against capitalism offers a way forward.

The Socialist Equality Party is the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International. We alone base ourselves on the rich political tradition represented by Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian Revolution, the principal opponent of Stalinism and theoretician of world socialist revolution. His sharp and insightful appraisal of British Labourism and the chicanery of its "left" representatives are of decisive significance today. We urge workers and youth to study this history and take the decision to join the SEP.



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