

Behind the faction fight in the UK's pro-Corbyn Momentum movement

Chris Marsden

31 December 2016

The headlines prompted by the December 3 National Committee of Momentum were uniform in character. The pro-Jeremy Corbyn pressure group, which had generally been portrayed as a threat to Labour's electoral prospects, made up of "wreckers" who want to purge the party's "sensible" right wing, was rebranded as a precious political jewel to be protected from a "Trotskyist" takeover.

"Momentum is a beacon of hope. It must be saved from the saboteurs," wrote the *Guardian*'s Owen Jones on December 7. The "grassroots movement" faces being "destroyed," he warned.

Paul Mason, speaking on the BBC's "Daily Politics," stated that to prevent it being taken over, "Momentum has to be ready to become an affiliated society of Labour. That means everybody in it has to be in the Labour Party."

If not, he declared, "I will not remain in Momentum, and nor will thousands of us. This will be sorted in the direction of party loyalty, discipline and a moving on very quickly."

Jones and Mason utilised the same source for their pose of outrage as a score of newspapers across the political spectrum: a blog written by Laura Murray, recently elected as one of Momentum's women's officers. Murray, 27, portrays herself as a political naif who went to the December 3 meeting full of enthusiasm for Corbyn's professed "new" and "kinder, gentler" politics only to be confronted by vicious factionalists intent on getting their own way.

In a statement dutifully regurgitated in a dozen newspapers and periodicals, she wrote of the danger posed by "Dyed-in-the-wool Trotskyists... a vocal, disruptive and over-bearing minority who have won themselves key position in the regional committees."

These elements were "sectarian," "destructive to our movement" and intent on halting democracy. Murray said this was behind the criticisms of the proposal of Momentum founder Jon Lansman to implement a One Member One Vote (OMOV) system of determining policy online, as opposed to a delegate structure, congresses, etc.

The "generational divide was starkly visible for all to see," she wrote, with pro-OMOV delegates "more likely to be younger, in the Labour Party and close to Momentum staff and Jon Lansman" and anti-OMOV delegates "more likely to be older, Trotskyist, seasoned in far-left factions, not in the Labour Party."

Supposedly "socialist stalwarts" such as Jill Mountford of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty (AWL) were bullies who used the "disgraceful term 'Alt-Stalinist' to mock us online."

Murray was outraged, as she has "never felt any need to define myself or my politics by any dead Russian man..."

The "Trotskyists," she added, wanted only to build Momentum as an alternative to Labour and would eventually "abandon" Corbyn for "their Momentum Party," which "will die the same pathetic death as every other Trotskyist party in British history."

Murray overnight became a poster girl for the media. Her bona fides as the untainted "voice of youth" were repeated ad nauseam, with Jones

writing of the conflict between the "younger, idealistic, campaign-oriented and pluralistic" and the "sectarians" who "smear their opponents as right-wingers, Stalinists, bureaucrats, as having ulterior and sinister motives..."

"The prize," he said, "is Momentum's contact data, containing the details of tens of thousands of people."

Who are the Momentum leadership?

The entire presentation is a tissue of lies.

The conflict within Momentum is between a bureaucratic cabal at the core of Corbyn's leadership team, many of whom are indeed Stalinists, and representatives of various pseudo-left groups who are bitterly opposed to Trotskyism and who have no intention of breaking with either Corbyn or the Labour Party.

Laura Murray is the daughter of Andrew Murray, the hardline Stalinist chief of staff of Unite—the trade union whose leader, Len McCluskey, backs Corbyn. Murray senior was for years in the same ultra-Stalinist Straight Left faction as Corbyn's chief policy adviser, Seumas Milne.

Laura Murray is a full-time functionary employed by Corbyn as a policy adviser on £40,000 a year. She advises Labour's town hall spokesman Grahame Morris and is a close friend of Corbyn's son, Ben. Corbyn's other son, Seb, is employed as Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell's chief of staff on £45,000 a year.

This clique, which includes Lansman, of whom more must be said, determines the actual policy pursued by Momentum.

Earlier this year, all of this information was being regularly raked up to attack Corbyn, alongside the fact that he writes regularly for the Stalinist *Morning Star*.

On September 17, for example, the *Daily Mail* rhetorically asked Laura Murray, "Who is your glamorous new assistant, comrade?" Andrew Gilligan, in the November 8 *Daily Telegraph*, wrote of Murray as one of "the Corbyn hardcore plotting to deselect Labour moderates" and "the daughter of Andrew Murray, chief of staff of the Unite union and a member of the Communist Party of Britain, which defends Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the dictator Josef Stalin."

What a difference a month—and a liberal dose of anti-Trotskyist rhetoric—makes in the manner in which both Murray's public persona and that of Momentum are presented.

The portrayal of Lansman as motivated by democratic considerations is more ludicrous still. The membership database cited by Jones as the supposed prize in the factional dispute is, in fact, wholly owned by a company of which Lansman is reportedly the sole director. In effect, Momentum, far from being run as a genuine "grassroots" campaign, is more like a one-man business.

Lansman's overarching political concern regarding Momentum is shared by Corbyn and his inner circle—to ensure that it remains as a useful adjunct of the Labour Party. In order to get Corbyn elected and re-elected as leader, Momentum assumed all the rhetoric associated with mass participatory democracy and successfully appealed to widespread hostility to the Labour right and the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) as a whole. But having succeeded in this task, it must now be made safe for the PLP and Corbyn's stated aim of preventing the PLP's collapse, or "Pasokification" (a reference to the meltdown of the Greek social democrats.)

Lansman has reassured the *Guardian* that he did not intend to walk away from Momentum, together with his 21,000-strong membership list. But his public comments have more generally been to urge an end to hostilities in the Labour Party.

In the course of Corbyn's Labour Party leadership election campaign, Lansman stressed that Momentum was opposed to any efforts to deselect right-wing MPs. In October, after Corbyn's second victory, Lansman warned against any challenge to Labour MP Tom Watson, who denounced Momentum members as a "rabble," continuing as deputy leader. Lansman called for an end to all "personal animosity" in the party and the trade unions. "We will not campaign for mandatory reselection nor to deselect any individual MP," he reiterated.

Lansman's appeasement of the right wing is matched by his efforts to control Momentum. According to the accounts of various pseudo-left individuals and groups, prior to December 3, Lansman and his allies on the Momentum Steering Committee, mostly full-time Labour bureaucrats, had prevented the National Committee from meeting since May.

In mid-November, Lansman launched the MxV (momentum equals mass times velocity) online platform, which asks members to post "proposals" for conference, to be ranked by how many members have clicked a "support" button that would supposedly determine Momentum's policy. On this basis, it was decreed by Lansman that the first Momentum conference, scheduled for February, should be held online only, with electronic voting and no debates.

Having (narrowly) suffered a reversal at the finally convened December 3 NC meeting, Lansman's supporters such as Laura Murray, Jones and Mason sallied forth with their invective-strewn responses. The other striking participant was the Communist Party of Britain's *Morning Star*, which combined an attack on "wreckers on the far-left and right of Labour [who] want to carry on last summer's civil war" with a declaration that "Corbynistas" and "the centre left" working together "should be unstoppable."

Jones concluded his *Guardian* report on the December 3 meeting with the following appeal: "One man is uniquely placed to save Momentum from the sectarians who would throttle the enthusiasm and excitement of the young people who have been inspired in the last 18 months. That's Jeremy Corbyn."

On December 20, Corbyn heeded the call by emailing a letter to every Momentum member to "not let internal debate distract from our work that has to be done to help Labour win elections."

The role of the pseudo-left in opposing a political break with Labour

For all the denunciations levelled against the pseudo-left groups by the Stalinists grouped around Corbyn, these organisations have no intention of opposing the use of Momentum to steer the politically disaffected back into the Labour Party. Indeed, they have expressed outrage at charges to the contrary issued by Murray, Jones, et al.

No pseudo-left organisation is working towards splitting workers and

young people away from Labour to form a new party. Rather, at every point they readily profess their support for Corbyn's campaign to, ever-so-gently, nudge the party leftwards.

The December 14 Open Letter to Lansman sent by Alliance for Workers' Liberty member Martin Thomas is typical of their craven efforts to maintain the grip of Labour over the working class. He cites his long record of working dutifully alongside the Momentum leader since 1980 and makes a humble request that "it may be possible to talk quietly, without media-provided megaphones and howling about sabotage, to discuss what adjustments or compromises can best keep Momentum on the road. We are for unity."

In October, the Socialist Equality Party's Third National Congress adopted the resolution "Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party: The strategic lessons."

The resolution details the record of the SEP in opposing illusions that Corbyn would somehow recapture the Labour Party for socialism and records his capitulation to the right on all fundamental questions, carried out in the name of preserving party unity.

The resolution draws attention to the September 14, 2015 statement by the SEP following Corbyn's initial leadership victory, which explained:

"No one can seriously propose that this party—which, in its politics and organisation and the social composition of its apparatus, is Tory in all but name—can be transformed into an instrument of working class struggle. The British Labour Party did not begin with Blair. It is a bourgeois party of more than a century's standing and a tried and tested instrument of British imperialism and its state machine. Whether led by Clement Attlee, James Callaghan or Jeremy Corbyn, its essence remains unaltered."

The SEP's Congress resolution contrasts this prescient warning with the statements of the pseudo-left Socialist Party, which hailed Corbyn's second victory as a step towards Labour's refounding "as a democratic, socialist, anti-austerity party," and those of Socialist Resistance, which proclaimed a Corbyn-led Labour Party to be the best chance in "generations" for "reshaping politics on the left and making a difference at the level of government."

The resolution states: "The pseudo-left groups all pass over more than a century of the history of the Labour Party, in which every effort to push it to the left has ended in defeat or capitulation."

The moves now being made within Momentum to close off all genuine debate and insist on absolute loyalty to Labour should spur those workers and youth who looked to it to provide a socialist alternative to carefully study the SEP statement.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact