

British Labour Party moving to support ending free movement of EU workers

Robert Stevens
7 January 2017

In his New Year message, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn sought to re-launch himself as a “populist” leader. The most striking refutation of efforts to cast him as a principled politician “standing up for people” and “taking on the establishment” is provided by the discussion over Labour championing immigration controls against European Union citizens.

The demands for a political makeover for Corbyn centre on enabling Labour to compete on the terrain of right-wing movements such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) by abandoning his declared support for the free movement of EU labour.

Britain’s exit from the European Union (Brexit) has provoked a major crisis for the bourgeoisie and all its institutions, including the Labour Party. Corbyn’s position, which he shares with big business and the Labour right, is that business must have continued access to the EU’s Single Market. Free movement of EU citizens to other EU countries is enshrined in the constitution of the EU along with the movement of goods, services and capital.

However, pushed by its anti-EU wing and seeking to win back support it has lost to UKIP, the Conservative government of Theresa May is demanding that an end to the free movement of EU citizens is at the core of Brexit negotiations.

Citing the same considerations of supposedly representing the “will of the people” as expressed in the June 23 referendum vote to leave the EU, senior Labour figures have stepped up their own demands that an end to free movement must be made central to the terms of Brexit.

Keir Starmer, whom Corbyn appointed as Labour’s Shadow Brexit Secretary, stated last month that the party’s support for free movement is no longer sustainable and “the rules must change.” Speaking to the *Sunday Times* January 1, he reiterated that there must be

“a fundamental rethink of immigration rules from start to finish.”

Andy Burnham, the former shadow Home Secretary and the party’s candidate for mayor of Greater Manchester, has said he is no longer willing to be “complicit” in Corbyn’s support for free movement. This, he claimed, was “inherently discriminatory” against working class areas of the country and was “undermining the cohesion of our communities and the safety of our streets.”

Others Labourites including Hilary Benn and Yvette Cooper have called for tighter controls, with Cooper telling the House of Commons magazine last month that Labour “can make a progressive argument to say that free movement hasn’t been working for the British economy in a way that’s fair.”

The *Financial Times* ran an article headlined, “Councillors tell Labour to take tougher line on immigration,” featuring a series of interviews with Labour councillors in 20 constituencies where there had been a clear vote to leave the European Union in last June’s referendum on membership and where UKIP is presently in second, or a close third place, behind the sitting Labour Member of Parliament. The piece was a barely disguised call for the removal of Corbyn on the basis that he is “out of touch” with Labour voters.

The conflict between the Tories and Labour over which is more stridently opposed to immigration, whether or not the politicians involved supported Brexit last summer, demonstrates the extent to which political designations of what is “left” and “right” in capitalist politics have no genuine content. What is being played out post-Brexit is which party best articulates the national interests of British imperialism. Anti-migrant rhetoric is a key platform for the promotion of the type of nationalism and xenophobia needed to justify policies of trade war and stepped-up militarism.

Corbyn and his supporters, as always, have signalled

their readiness to change tack with the prevailing political winds. Speaking to the *Independent*, a source close to the leadership said that Corbyn's shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott and self-styled left "has never called for open borders... all Diane has proposed is sensible and progressive immigration policies that benefit Britain and its economy."

It should be noted that Corbyn is a political bedfellow of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain (CPB) and has written regularly for its daily *Morning Star*. The CPB is a long-time opponent of freedom of movement and a purveyor of nationalism. It was a vital component of the Left Leave group in the Brexit campaign along with the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party, Counterfire and others.

More fundamentally, Corbyn is politically and financially beholden to sections of the trade union bureaucracy that are actively championing an end to free movement.

Britain's largest union, Unite, is currently holding its leadership election with incumbent Len McCluskey—a Corbyn supporter—and challenger Gerard Coyne fighting primarily over how best to respond to the threat both agree is represented by immigration.

Coyne stated, "My many conversations with Unite members leave me in no doubt that those who voted for Brexit expect that promise of an end to uncontrolled immigration from the EU to be kept, and will feel betrayed if it is not."

He added, "Theresa May and other ministers should not wait until Article 50 has been triggered to set out a negotiating position on free movement of labour. They should be saying now, without equivocation, that the issue is non-negotiable. There can be no compromise on the principle of taking back control of our borders."

McCluskey said that Labour could lose electorally to UKIP if it did not "get its narrative right on free movement" and immigration. Launching his bid to be re-elected as general secretary, he declared "workers have always done best when the labour supply is controlled and communities are stable." He presently argues that this should be achieved by extending trade union organisation and collective bargaining protections, rather than ending EU free movement.

Workers must oppose all attempts to divide them against one another, including calls for "taking back control of borders" and for the reassertion of "national sovereignty." However, this implies no support for either the Remain faction of the British bourgeoisie or any claim

that support for the EU somehow represents a means of opposing the spread of nationalist and xenophobic sentiment.

The EU is an instrument of the European bourgeoisie and the Single Market is a trade bloc developed so as to compete more effectively against its global rivals—to which free movement of labour is a subordinate aspect to secure the interests of Europe's corporate elite. The EU already operates as a Fortress Europe when it comes to keeping out immigrants. Moreover, it is teetering on the brink of collapse as a result of the spread of nationalist tensions, protectionist sentiment and the emergence of right-wing movements across the continent.

In opposition to this, British workers must understand that they are part of an international class, one whose interests are diametrically opposed to the nationalism spewed out by the bosses and their political representatives. This means consciously asserting their own independent class interests in opposition to all sections of the British ruling class and in a common struggle with workers across Europe against capitalism.

The Socialist Equality Party called for an active boycott of the Brexit referendum and our warning that the Remain and Leave camps were equally reactionary has been entirely confirmed by events. We said in our statement, "Against the national chauvinism and xenophobia promoted by both sides in the referendum campaign, the working class must advance its own internationalist programme to unify the struggles of workers throughout Europe in defence of living standards and democratic rights. The alternative for workers to the Europe of the transnational corporations is the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe."

The author also recommends:

For an active boycott of the Brexit referendum!

[29 February 2016]



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)