

Row over Brexit punctures myth of unity behind Corbyn at Labour Party conference

Robert Stevens**27 September 2017**

The Labour Party's annual conference in Brighton was meant to be a show of unity, after two years in which the right-wing sought through various means to oust leader Jeremy Corbyn.

Instead, as it opened, 40 senior Labour figures, led by Blairite MPs Chuka Umunna and other prominent right-wingers who played lead roles in the failed putsch plots, authored a letter in the *Observer* -the sister paper of the *Guardian*.

The letter, also signed by Labour Members of the European Parliament, Labour peers and leading trade union bureaucrats, called on the ongoing Labour conference to "commit to staying in the Single Market and Customs Union--ruling out no options for how to achieve this..." It added, "Labour is right to argue for a transitional period as we leave the EU, but we must now go further... For the sake of jobs, public services, peace in Ireland and the rights of everyone who calls the UK home, we must offer a clear alternative to the Tories' destructive Brexit."

Since Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May triggered the legislation, in March, for the UK to leave the European Union over a two-year period, sections of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the trade unions have insisted Labour must position itself as the representative of the majority of Britain's capitalist class who want to keep access to the EU's Single Market.

With the loss of the Tories parliamentary majority in June's general election, they have gone on the offensive.

This month, Tom Watson, Labour's deputy leader and opponent of its nominally left leader, Jeremy Corbyn, stated that Labour was the party of "soft Brexit" and that remaining in the Single Market and Customs Union "might be a permanent outcome of the

negotiations [with the EU]."

Watson's comments were followed by the formation of the Labour Campaign for the Single Market by two Blairite MPs, Heidi Alexander and Alison McGovern. It calls for the UK to remain "in the European Single Market and Customs Union," with the group planning to have this position adopted as party policy at the conference.

The right-wing had justified their last coup attempt against Corbyn on the grounds that he had not campaigned strongly enough in favour of the EU, despite leading the party's Remain campaign. While he has committed Labour to remaining in the single market for a Brexit "transition" period of up to four years, he has had to make certain criticisms of the EU's neo-liberal policies and austerity measures.

Speaking to the BBC's Andrew Marr as the conference opened, Corbyn said, "We need to look very carefully at the terms of any trade relationship because at the moment we're part of the single market, that has within it restrictions in state aid and state spending, that has pressures on it through the European Union to privatise rail, for example."

The letter from Umunna, et al was followed Monday by an article in the *Guardian* by Manuel Cortes, the general secretary of the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association. He wrote, "Hard Brexit is now a corpse" that was "put to the sword by Theresa May's own hand when she conceded the need for a two-year transition period with her speech in Florence..."

He added, "Labour's current position on Brexit [to leave the EU] is simply unsustainable," concluding, "The best Brexit plan now is staying put."

In another article on the blog site *Labourlist*, Cortes called for a second referendum to reverse the "Brexit nightmare". He wrote, "With a very clear head, I now

believe a referendum on the final deal versus continued EU membership may be the only way to ensure a democratic outcome from Tory Brexit.”

Corbyn’s response to these demands was to ensure there was no public conflict with the Blairites and their trade union backers. With the supposed “left” around Corbyn now controlling the National Executive Committee, the arrangements for the conference and the majority of delegates, it was they that ensured there was no fight against the right.

The Corbyn supporting Momentum group e-mailed its members to recommend four subjects to be chosen for debates, which Brexit was not amongst.

Summing up the position of the leadership, Shadow Chancellor and close ally, John McDonnell said, “On Brexit, the interesting thing is people are trying to build a consensus now, and not divide the party.”

The right, however, are not interested in party unity. With leading Blairites denouncing a “stitch-up” and talking of an “absolute disgrace”, Corbyn’s faction responded by drawing up a “Draft Labour NEC Statement on Brexit,” restating Labour’s basic policy on Brexit. This was put to the conference in a session of just an hour’s duration Monday, without debate, and passed.

The statement said, “Labour is clear that we need a tariff- and impediment-free trading relationship with the European Union.” During a Brexit “transitional period Labour would seek to remain in a customs union with the EU and within the Single Market and would abide by the common rules of both.” But the statement did not commit the party to single market membership beyond the transition period—a key demand of the Blairites.

The conference vote on Brexit took on surreal elements, being held on the same day that it was announced that the beginning of a fourth round of talks between the government’s Brexit Secretary, David Davis and Michel Barnier on behalf of the EU, again broke up without agreement.

The talks took place just two days after Prime Minister Theresa May’s speech on Brexit in Florence. This was hyped as the basis on which the impasse reached on agreeing the terms of the cost of the UK’s EU “divorce” bill, the right of EU nationals who live Britain and the status of the Republic of Ireland/Northern Ireland border post-Brexit, could be

resolved. But May’s offer to pay just €20 billion up to 2020 and for a Brexit transitional period of “around two years”—based on the EU being able to count on Britain’s substantial military and intelligence capability—went down like a lead balloon with Brussels.

Commenting on the talks, Barnier asserted that a “discussion that is going to take place because the UK is asking for it on this transitional period does not mean we will no longer need to achieve sufficient progress.”

He added, “We are not going to mix up discussions on debts and discussion on the past commitments. We are not going to mix up those subjects, which are part of an orderly withdrawal, on a discussion of our future relationship.”

Barnier speaks for Germany, France and the major European powers who have all refused to make any concessions since the talks began six months ago. The already sharp tensions will only deteriorate further, following the result of Germany’s election on Sunday.

The position of Chancellor Angela Merkel is highly unstable after the collapse in the vote of her Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union alliance and that of her former coalition partners, the Social Democratic Party. With all the parties moving further to the right, on the grounds that they must reach an accommodation with supporters of the far right Alternative for Germany (AfD)—now the third largest party in parliament—it is not conciliation that is on offer, but the resort to nationalism by the ruling elites across Europe.



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