

Social cleansing in Haringey: Labour right reject Corbyn's pleas for "unity"

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2 February 2018

The Labour leader of Haringey council, Claire Kober, announced she will stand down after the May 3 local authority elections, blaming supporters of Momentum (allied to party leader Jeremy Corbyn) for her decision.

Kober heads a Labour-run council that is mounting one of the largest privatisation and social cleansing operations in the capital. She is also the chair of London Councils, which represents all 33 of the capital's local authorities.

The Haringey Development Vehicle (HDV) is a £2 billion privatisation project that transfers council housing, schools, clinics and commercial buildings to a holding company in a 50:50 partnership with the global private developer, Lendlease.

Five thousand social housing homes on seven council estates will make way for 6,400 "affordable" new homes, defined as up to 80 percent of the market rate, which is entirely unaffordable for the majority of existing tenants. Some 1,400 council homes on the Northumberland Park estate will be demolished as part of the investment in building a new stadium for billionaire-owned Premier League football team Tottenham Hotspur. Lendlease acquires about half of all the council's commercial portfolio, plus exclusive construction rights on 60 percent of Haringey's land.

Separately, Haringey is also establishing a joint venture with an unnamed private partner for housing acquisition and refurbishment, aimed at raising £95 million on the bond market.

The HDV project is deeply unpopular. It is the subject of a judicial review, which is yet to report, sought by 73-year-old local resident Gordon Peters. Indicating the extent of opposition, the selection process for Labour candidates to run in May's election saw 21 pro-HDV councillors junked by a large turnout of local party members in favour of those opposing the project.

Announcing her resignation, Kober claimed that she was a victim of "sexism, bullying, undemocratic

behaviour" that had left her, "the most senior woman in Labour local government ... disappointed and disillusioned."

Her statement epitomises the selfish character of the identity politics espoused by #MeToo and embraced by the Labour Party. On the basis of her gender, Kober demands the right to implement the most right-wing, anti-working class, pro-business policies without fear of criticism or restriction.

Attacking "ideological dogma," she complained that "terms like forced gentrification and social cleansing" were inappropriate in facilitating "the nuanced and complex debate we have to have about solving London's housing crisis."

Kober herself is unlikely to be re-elected as leader in the spring, making the reasons given for her delayed resignation—in another four months!—even more specious. But her statements are not merely those of a cynical individual. They sum up the class standpoint and social orientation of the Labour Party, whose reactionary physiognomy is on full display in Haringey.

Kober's remarks followed the resignation of another Blairite Haringey councillor, Nora Mulready. Denouncing opposition to privatisation as "immoral" and causing "great harm to society," Mulready said those opposing HDV were trying to "manufacture anger and hatred as fuel for their desired class war."

Her comments were made just a few miles from the burned-out shell of Grenfell Tower, in North Kensington, where at least 71 people lost their lives in June.

This awful, entirely preventable tragedy is a grisly memorial to the real class war that has taken places over decades. It has been largely one-sided, waged by the financial oligarchy and facilitated by those like Kober, Mulready and their Labour Party, which has ensured that the lives and social needs of the working class are entirely subordinate to private profit and corporate greed.

Anger at HDV has grown in the wake of the collapse of Carillion, a major government contractor heavily involved in the privatisation of public services under Tony Blair's Labour government. Thousands of jobs are threatened, public provision jeopardised and workers' pensions are on the line as a result.

Still Kober and her coterie of Labour councillors have made clear their determination to service the political requirements of big business, and to repudiate any semblance of democratic accountability.

At a meeting in January, a motion by the Labour Group—which included the newly selected anti-HDV candidates—pleaded for “party unity” in the face of divisions over the project.

Given that 57 Labour Party candidates had been selected, many opposed to HDV, and that “most if not all” of the 19 local party branches were against it, the existing council should not commit to spending public funds on a project that would likely be jettisoned, it argued.

Separately, 35 Labour candidates wrote to Kober informing her that, if elected, they would oppose HDV. Reassuring her that “we will all be campaigning for the return of a Labour Council,” the signatories politely requested they could trust Kober to “agree that a clear recognition of the changed situation regarding the HDV would be very helpful...”

Instead, 19 deselected councillors voted against the motion, which was defeated by 24 votes to 22. It is also reported that Kober refused to clarify if she would sign off on the HDV before the March pre-election “purdah period” in which no key decision on council projects can be taken.

The major factor the right wing has in its favour is the bankruptcy and cowardice of the Labour left.

The meeting was only able to endorse HDV because 22 of the Momentum-aligned councillors absented themselves, citing concerns that they could face party discipline for defying the whip!

To avoid this, the 22 councillors decided to appeal to Labour's National Executive Committee to prevent summary action against those opposed to HDV. The NEC last weekend duly voted unanimously to request that Haringey halt the plans unless there could be successful “mediation” between the two sides.

This was the first meeting after which Corbyn had been able to supposedly consolidate his left-wing majority on the NEC.

The decision was immediately denounced by the Labour

right as “legally dubious” and “democratically unsound.”

An emergency council meeting has been called for February 7 at the request of the Liberal Democrats. Hoping to salvage some credibility as opponents of the HDV, the Liberal Democrats calculate that either the so-called “left” will fail yet again to vote or, if they do so, the right-wing will take disciplinary measures, including a six-month suspension that will prevent the “lefts” from standing in May's elections.

Kober's decision to wait until May before she steps down can only be interpreted as a decision by the Labour right that they will stop at nothing to get their plans through.

Kober has the backing of the Labour apparatus. Tony Blair's former spin doctor, Alastair Campbell, took to the *Financial Times* to denounce the NEC for trying to impose “ideological purity” on Haringey Labour Party by calling for an end to privatisation.

In addition, the leaders of 68 Labour councils (out of a total of 123) took to the pages of Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times* to denounce the NEC for setting a “dangerous and alarming precedent.”

Among those insisting on their absolute “sovereignty” over policy are the leaders of Manchester, Birmingham and Newcastle councils. From London, the heads of Southwark, Lambeth, Lewisham, Tower Hamlets, Merton, Barking & Dagenham, Brent, Greenwich, Redbridge, Ealing, Hounslow, Enfield, Hammersmith & Fulham and Harrow councils and Westminster Council's Labour group also signed.

Writing in the pro-Labour *New Statesman*, Sarah Haywood insisted no mediation was possible, as it would mean “The Labour group [the right-wing clique, many of whom are now deselected] would necessarily have to concede to do something that a majority of them didn't support.”

Until recently Haywood headed Camden Council, which, in 2013, became the second Labour-run council—after Newham—to announce it was considering moving poorer families in rented accommodation out of the borough.



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