

Haringey Council leader Claire Kober: The social cleansing agenda of a Blairite ‘martyr’

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Claire Kober has become a media darling since she announced she would stand down as leader of Labour-run Haringey council, London in May.

Kober claimed that the decision was forced on her by the “threats, bullying, sexism and intimidation” she was made to endure from “left-wing” Labour activists.

What is the reality?

Haringey Council plans the largest privatisation of social assets undertaken by a local authority, with £2 billion worth of council housing, schools, clinics and commercial buildings transferred to the Haringey Development Vehicle (HDV)—a 50:50 partnership with the global private developer, Lendlease.

Some 1,400 council homes are to be demolished as part of a re-development scheme that will price many working-class residents out of the area, while making a vast profit for the corporations involved.

Popular opposition to HDV led to the deselection of many Labour councillors who back the privatisation by their party branches. Despite now being ineligible to run for Labour in May’s elections, those same councillors and some who have announced their own intended resignation voted to push through HDV at their last meeting, enabling the project to pass with just two votes.

When this blatantly anti-democratic move was protested, forcing Labour’s National Executive Committee (NEC) to politely request that Kober and her Blairite clique reconsider their policy, the Haringey leader announced her own resignation and went to the press with her tale of woe.

Kober speciously argues that she is a victim of sexist bullying, claiming, “The argument that I’m incompetent would not have been used if I were a man.” That some Labour Party members sang the lyric “I’ll be watching you” from the Police’s *Every breath you take*—now described as a “stalking” song—is, according to Kober, proof of misogynist intimidation.

Her claims have been widely publicised as an example, in the words of *Telegraph* columnist Janet Daley, of “ruthless far left” tactics “in the great Marxist tradition.” Even the pages of the *Financial Times* were opened up for Kober to tell her tale of “the Labour left’s war on local government.”

What Kober’s self-serving *FT* article shows, however, is the contempt and hostility of the Labour apparatus for working people—who they insist have no right to challenge the right-wing policies being enforced against them across the country. Kober has received the support of over 70 leaders of Labour councils nationally, as well as many Labourites, including London Mayor Sadiq Khan, who are all enforcing Tory spending cuts.

Kober begins by asserting that “austerity has been the defining feature” of her period in office. She does not state how or when this austerity began, and for good reason. The age of austerity, now in place for more than a decade, was first initiated under the Brown Labour government, following the 2008 economic crisis.

Having deliberately fuelled the speculative and criminal actions of the major financial corporations throughout its ten years in office, Labour bailed out the banks and super-rich, while using the crisis to deepen the offensive against working people.

As it is, Kober makes clear her support for austerity, stating smugly, “In the early days of public spending constraint, many made apocalyptic predictions” about what it would mean. Instead, “thanks to creativity, innovation and good old-fashioned financial management we’ve defied expectations.”

No reference to the fact that the UK faces the longest fall in living standards on record, in which real disposable incomes will have declined for 19 successive quarters.

Only a few paragraphs later, Kober states, “Everyone knows that London is in the grip of a housing crisis,” with 3,000 families in temporary accommodation and 9,000 on

the housing waiting list in Haringey alone.

How this happened despite “good old-fashioned financial management” is again not explained. The real and worsening housing crisis is referenced only so that Kober can try and justify the destruction of yet more working-class homes.

Council housing was first sold off under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. But it was vastly expanded by the Blair and Brown Labour governments through public housing privatisation via “stock transfer”—selling off local authorities’ property portfolios to housing associations. An estimated one million sales went through under the Labour governments between 1997 and 2010.

As of 2015, the number of council-owned social homes had fallen by 55 percent, from 3.37 million in 1994 to 1,643,000. The rate of sell-off has accelerated since then, with 72 councils nationally disposing of 12,000 properties in two years. Less than 5,000 replacement homes have been built.

The money to be made is vast. Conservative-run Kensington and Chelsea—where the Grenfell Tower inferno was caused by cost-cutting—made almost £15 million from the sale of just 46 council homes, so inflated are land values.

But it is Labour councils that are leading the way in this property bonanza. Haringey is joined by Southwark, Tower Hamlets and others in the capital selling off of homes. But such policies are emulated by Labour councils nationally.

As working-class homes are sold off or demolished, the number of empty “high-end” properties—bought by housing speculators—is rocketing. Again, the situation is particularly acute in London where 19,845 homes were vacant last year for over six months.

Dubbed “posh ghost towers,” 3,000 properties priced at more than £1,500 per square foot are currently on the market, and there are 14,000 unsold homes priced between £1,000-£1,500 per square foot. Every one of the 10 luxury penthouse apartments in the Shard, costing up to £50 million each, are unsold five years after it was first opened.

Still councils have granted property developers planning permission for a further 26,000 luxury flats across London, priced at more than £1 million each. In contrast, just 6,423 “affordable” homes (which are unaffordable for most given that this is defined as up to 80 percent of market value) were built in London in 2016/2017, compared to 19,622 in 2014/2015.

FT, Kober writing claims that opposition

social madness involves a “clash between the politics of pragmatism and the politics of ideology the like of which hasn’t been seen for 35 years.”

In truth, it is the political ideology of neo-liberalism—greedily embraced and ruthlessly practiced by Labour—that has predominated for 35 years. It is directly responsible for the resulting social crisis, of which the criminal Grenfell Tower fire that claimed at least 71 lives was the most grotesque expression.

According to government figures, nationally some 120,000 children alone are forced to live in hostels or other temporary accommodation, a rise of 70 percent since 2010, while the number of rough sleepers has doubled, with a 73 percent increase in the last three years.

Kober frames the “clash” in Haringey as one involving Blairite “realists” and “hard-left” ideologues grouped around Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

The real crime of the Labour “left” is its constant efforts to reconcile with the right wing, so much so that those councillors newly selected in Haringey based on their stated opposition to HDV absented themselves from the meeting where it was voted on, enabling the right to pass it.

What Kober and her Blairite clique—along with their backers in the financial oligarchy—are really alarmed about is that the anti-HDV sentiment jeopardising their plans in Haringey is the start of a broader fightback by the working class against the social counter-revolution of the last decades.

The *FT* reports that local authorities “in Camden, Vauxhall, Lambeth and Westminster are all facing growing opposition to their housing plans,” with pressure “building against development in ‘every’ Labour-controlled borough in the capital.”

That is why Kober insists that neither she nor her fellow councillors can be held accountable for their actions and that any effort to do so is “intimidation” and “bullying.”



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