

UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn slithers toward sellout

Chris Marsden
1 March 2018

The depth of the political crisis facing British imperialism is indicated by the generally welcoming response of the main business organisations to Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's keynote speech on Brexit delivered on Monday.

Amid intense discussion of how long Prime Minister Theresa May can survive, Corbyn's pledge to seek a new negotiated customs union with the European Union (EU) was hailed for providing opportunities to counteract the dominance of the "hard-Brexit" wing of the Conservative Party. This, it is hoped, could make possible a negotiated agreement allowing tariff-free access to the Single European Market and even reversing Brexit should May's efforts to secure an acceptable Brexit deal fail.

The *Financial Times* praised Corbyn's "welcome shift on the customs union" for serving "the national interest" by possibly pushing the Conservatives to pursue "a more sensible Brexit."

Confederation of British Industry Director General Carolyn Fairbairn praised the "Labour leader's commitment to a customs union" that puts "jobs and living standards first by remaining in a close economic relationship with the EU." Stephen Martin of the Institute of Directors added that "many businesses, particularly manufacturers, will be pleased to hear the Opposition's proposal to keep a customs union on the table."

The welcome extended to Corbyn by such forces is a warning of the pro-business and anti-working-class character of his programme. A careful reading of his speech provides a measure of the role that would be played by any future Labour government, under conditions where a deepening Tory crisis could hasten a general election.

The right-wing media is filled with denunciations of Corbyn for his "betrayal" of the Brexit vote. However, the programme Corbyn advances is a betrayal of the working class whether Britain leaves the EU or not.

Corbyn's central appeal was for ruling circles to accept Labour as a viable alternative to a dysfunctional and deeply divided Conservative administration: one that is in thrall to its right-wing, representing a layer of hedge-fund managers and speculators, whose narrow self-interests risk cutting off British capital from its major international market, Europe.

Labour's commitment to business interests was reinforced by references to ending the situation where "productivity lags dangerously behind the other major economies," which means stepped-up exploitation of the working class, and criticism of the Tories for failing to close the budget deficit (between borrowing and spending) "that was due to be eradicated by 2015, then 2016, then 2017, then 2020 has now had to be put back to 2025." Whatever Corbyn says to the contrary, "closing the deficit" means that austerity and social cuts must deepen.

Corbyn's speech repeatedly committed Labour to Brexit, while pledging to seek a "close" post-Brexit relationship that safeguards access to the Single European Market and the tariff-free trade embodied in the customs union. Labour wanted "a bespoke, negotiated relationship of its own," after a transition period in which the UK "would seek to remain in a customs union with the EU and within the single market...on the existing terms." It wanted a final deal maintaining "the benefits of the single

market and the customs union"—with the proviso that Britain is "able to negotiate agreement of new trade deals in our national interest."

He left open that reversing Brexit might still be possible at a later date—given that Labour "will not support any Tory deal that would do lasting damage to jobs, rights and living standards" and would "guarantee Parliament a meaningful vote on the final deal."

It was on this basis that Corbyn made an extraordinary appeal for national unity—to MPs of all parties, prepared to put the people's interests before ideological fantasies, to join us in supporting the option of a new UK customs union with the EU, that would give us a say in future trade deals."

This pro-capitalist perspective centres on the assertion that Labour can secure a new social compact between the classes—providing that a newly sobered City of London and big business accept, verbally at least, the merits of slightly higher taxation, increased funding for the National Health Service and tackling social inequality as the necessary agenda for post-Brexit Britain.

Large elements of his speech were drawn from the "left Brexit" rhetoric of the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain and the pseudo-left groups during the 2016 referendum campaign, meant to appeal to Labour's working-class base and channel opposition to the EU in a nationalist direction.

Corbyn has long espoused the cross-class, popular front nationalism associated with Stalinism and its "British Road to Socialism" through the Labour Party. His political career began as a supporter of Tony Benn's Alternative Economic Strategy in the 1980s, which is presented in a greatly adulterated form by his

key Stalinist advisors on EU policy—Seumas Milne and Andrew Murray. His speech was praised by the *Morning Star* as the realisation of "Lexit" [Left Brexit]—"Corbyn is streets ahead of many of his parliamentary colleagues on this one."

Corbyn's proposed reforms are a thin gruel that in no way matches up to the scale of the social nightmare faced by working people, but even this is political window dressing. Any genuine encroachment on the interests of big business would require class struggle, not class compromise.

The ruling elite has no intention of relinquishing its obscene wealth in response to a moral appeal from Corbyn. Even as it praised Corbyn for his position on a customs union, the *Financial Times* solidarised itself with the pro-hard Brexit press such as Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* by warning that Corbyn "favours mass nationalisation and is preparing for a run on the pound if elected to office" and poses "a greater threat to the UK's growth prospects than all but the worst Brexit outcomes."

Most fundamentally, as was most decisively confirmed by the collapse of the Soviet Union, in a globalised economy dominated by transnational corporations and escalating trade and military conflicts, there is no possibility whatsoever of pursuing any form of autarkic national reformist economic policy. Even an attempt to do so would meet a vicious campaign of economic and political sabotage, not only from the ruling

elite in Britain but from the United States and the European powers.

Corbyn's version of "Lexit" recognises the reality of Britain's reliance on the global market, but only from the standpoint of the capitalist class. Not once does Corbyn even address the European and international working class. Instead, he portrays an orientation to the EU—the main instrument of the European bourgeoisie—as an expression of "the best internationalist traditions of the labour movement and our country." Corbyn's sole concern is to protect the interests of British capitalism in the EU, which accounts for 44 percent of UK exports.

In a significant passage, Corbyn spoke of how a Mini car will, during production, cross the Channel three times and be worked on in France and Germany as well as the UK. But this demonstration of the unified international character of the working class was referenced only in terms of how "one of Britain's most iconic brands" is reliant "on a frictionless, interwoven supply chain."

He asserted that a "close" alliance with the EU is a means of "supporting our industrial sectors, protecting workers and consumers and safeguarding the environment."

Corbyn listed the terrible impact of "eight years of Conservative austerity, where wages are still lower today than they were a decade ago" and the government's Brexit agenda of "pushing Britain into a spiral of deregulation in rights and standards" only in order to give the EU a relatively clean bill of health.

But he is speaking of an institution that has spent the past decade imposing massive cuts in wages and working conditions and that has eliminated vast tranches of public service provision.

It is particularly striking that, given his claims to be advancing an anti-austerity agenda, he makes no reference whatsoever to how Syriza betrayed similar promises to reject austerity as the price for continued membership of the EU.

Corbyn pretends otherwise, but a two-year transitional agreement with the EU "on the existing terms" means accepting austerity. It confirms that whenever a choice is to be made between his anti-austerity promises to workers and the requirements of British capital, there will be only one victor.

A similar apologia was offered for the anti-migrant policies associated with Fortress Europe.

Corbyn identified the world's third great scourge as the 65 million refugees across the world "fleeing conflict, persecution, human rights abuses, social breakdown and climate disasters." But his answer was to support the EU's efforts to keep migrants trapped in Africa by its "crack down on the people smugglers." He praised the EU's naval mission in the Mediterranean, Operation Sophia, and claimed Britain's Royal Navy was engaged in a humanitarian quest to stop "desperate people...drowning in pursuit of sanctuary."

Corbyn's support for anti-migrant measures is fully in line with his own domestic politics. His support for the EU is not recent—he campaigned for Remain in

2016. But his declared "scepticism" on membership was tied to the anti-migrant argument of the Left Leave campaigners, who portrayed this as a means of avoiding the use of cheap labour from eastern Europe to undermine wages and working conditions. Post-referendum, Corbyn feels free to boldly declare, "Our immigration system will change, and freedom of movement will, as a statement of fact, end when we leave the European Union."

To reinforce his insistence of maintaining trade relations with the EU, Corbyn derided those who "seem very keen on downgrading our trading links with Europe" when "deals with the US or China" would not "compensate for a significant loss of trade with our trading neighbours in the EU." Aligning the UK with "Trump's America" would, he said, "open the door to a flood of further privatisations" and force "the British public to eat chlorinated chicken."

What does such a position imply? Corbyn has not been converted to the Franco-German project of European integration, and he makes clear that he will oppose EU measures where these contradict Britain's national interests. Rather, as a representative of British imperialism, he is already calculating which trade and political alliances are most necessary to cultivate, in Europe and beyond.

Such unprincipled considerations will only drag British workers into the very trade conflicts he blames for provoking a "race to the bottom on vital protections and rights at work." More dangerous still, he does so under conditions where the struggle of the imperialist powers for global hegemony has raised the growing danger of war with Russia and China by all the NATO powers.

One of the main reasons for Corbyn's popular appeal among workers and youth is his record of opposing war. But his speech ties opposition to "the use of unilateral military action and intervention," and future "regime change wars" to a "partnership with the EU."

Corbyn relies on illusions that the EU is somehow less militaristic than the US and British imperialism. But Germany, France and other major powers are frantically engaged in an armaments race and are developing a European Army to compete for global influence with NATO. President Emmanuel Macron has announced a staggering 35 percent increase to France's military budget, called for the reinstitution of the draft and threatened to bomb Syria. Germany's Social Democrat Minister of Foreign Affairs Sigmar Gabriel declares that Europe needs "a joint projection of power around the world" and cannot do so without military means "because as the only vegetarian, we will find it damn hard in a world of carnivores."

The working class cannot secure its interests on a nationalist basis—through a "left Brexit," including one centred on maintaining EU trade, or through resumed membership of the EU.

In the 2016 referendum campaign, the Socialist Equality Party called for an active boycott, warning that both the Remain and Leave camps articulated the interests of competing sections of the bourgeoisie. Their differences were over how best to defend the interests of British capitalism against its European and international rivals under conditions of economic slump and the escalation of militarism and war.

The SEP urged the working class to maintain political independence from all sections of the ruling class, advancing an internationalist programme to unify the struggles of workers throughout Europe in defence of living standards and democratic rights and against militarism and war—for the United Socialist States of Europe. That call laid the basis for the political rearming and reorientation of the working class in Britain and throughout Europe, under the leadership of the SEP and our comrades and co-thinkers in the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact