

Corbyn outlines nationalist, anti-migrant pitch for Labour government

Robert Stevens
26 July 2018

Jeremy Corbyn addressed the Engineering Employers Federation (EEF) Wednesday to outline his pitch for a Labour government.

In a speech titled “Build it in Britain Again,” he outlined a right-wing programme centred on economic nationalism and barely disguised anti-migrant prejudice.

Under conditions of a worsening crisis for Theresa May’s Conservative government, with the pro- and anti-European Union factions at loggerheads as the March 2019 deadline for Brexit approaches, Corbyn sought to reassure business that Labour was the party it could trust to navigate troubled waters ahead.

Just three years ago, Corbyn was elected Labour leader by a landslide on the basis that he represented a left-wing and even socialist opposition to austerity and war. With the possibility that he could lead government coming closer all this is being ditched.

There was not a single reference to socialism, capitalism, or even the “working class” in the speech. There was just a single reference to austerity, but no talk of ending it.

There were obligatory references to the plight of the majority of the population, with “the spread of insecure work, low pay and zero hours or temporary contracts,” causing “stress, debt and despondency,” as the “the super-rich have grown still richer.” But there was no call for any serious inroads against the wealth of the super-rich, or any appeal to the working class as the only social force capable of doing so.

The intractable problems of society were couched purely in the realm of a few misconceived ideas. “We can get rid of the magical thinking of the free market that has led to a minority becoming extremely rich at the expense of everybody else.” In the vaguest terms, he declared, “we will replace it with a new economy, transformed so that it’s run for and by the many, not the few.”

There were innumerable references to the “people,”

who Labour was seeking to unite so as to “forge a new relationship between workers, manufacturers, communities and the government.”

The people to whom he is referring was made clear by his audience. The EEF declares itself “the voice of UK manufacturing and engineering and a leading provider of business support,” dedicated to ensuring that manufacturing industry is “able to thrive, innovate and compete both locally and on a global scale.”

Such is the cosying up of Labour to big business that it was Corbyn’s second speech to the EEF this year. He spelled out that a Labour government would be dedicated to facilitating their international competitiveness against their major rivals. Returning to his theme, Corbyn stressed that Britain required an industrial strategy because “for the last forty years a kind of magical thinking has dominated the way Britain is run,” which assumed the way forward was “for our country to manufacture less and less and to rely instead on cheap labour abroad to produce imports,” while “skewing policy to the narrowest interests in the City of London.”

The reference to cheap labour is borrowed directly from the arsenal of the right-wing, which blames migrant workers rather than capitalism and the ruling elite for social inequality and the decline in living standards.

Aside from a glancing swipe at the financial swindlers in the City of London, he did not offer a single serious proposal to take them on.

The services sector makes up around 80 percent of British GDP and the financial sector a substantial proportion of that—accounting for almost 11 percent of the economy. And Labour will do nothing to jeopardise the global domination of British finance capital, which is why his vague reference to chasing “dodgy money out of the financial system” was as far as he went.

Instead Labour would rely on the good graces of the financial elite, with Corbyn only stating that the “very

richest companies must pay a bit more tax ...” to help “upgrade our creaking infrastructure,” with Labour providing “the planning and support to help industry compete on the world stage.”

Addressing the concerns of the corporate and financial elite that the UK will lose access to the EU’s Single Market and Customs Union, he pledged, “after Brexit the single biggest assistance we can give our exporters is securing full, tariff free access to our biggest export market, the European Union.”

“It’s so important that we seek to negotiate a new, comprehensive UK-EU customs union, with a British say in all future trade deal and arrangements.”

Those who need to be assisted, declared Corbyn, are massive conglomerates such as “BMW, Airbus, and other companies,” who have “warned of the real and damaging effects of Conservative customs chaos.”

This was a strategy in the national interest, he said, boasting, “It’s not often that the Labour Party and the Institute of Directors, the CBI and the TUC [Trades Union Congress] agree, we need to negotiate a new customs union.”

UK manufacturers were unable to compete on the global stage because “they are being sold out by a lack of a Conservative government industrial plan which has left our economy far too reliant on imports.”

Britain’s new passports would be made in France, Network Rail was awarding “tens of millions of pounds” in contracts to companies outside of the UK, while the National Health Service awarded overseas contracts worth over a billion. “That is why we will build things here again that for too long have been built abroad because we have failed to invest,” as it “will allow us to have greater control,” ensuring that the “government uses more of its own money to buy here in Britain.”

Labour would leverage the £200 billion spent by the state per year in the private sector that “alone gives us levers to stimulate industry, to encourage business to act in people’s interests.”

He stressed the necessity for business to retain access to a customs union with the EU, not only for trade but also geo-political, military-intelligence reasons.

All the anti-war rhetoric that helped secure his leadership victory was also thrown overboard. Corbyn’s protectionist measures were focussed on promoting its benefits in rejuvenating British imperialism’s war machine. A new British-only procurement policy was required as the “Ministry of Defence awarded contracts ... worth over £1.5 billion pounds even though we are under

no obligation under either European or international law to open up defence contracts to overseas bidders.”

He complained that the Tory government were “sending a £1 billion contract” on building three new Fleet Solid Support Ships for the Royal Fleet Auxillary overseas, when they could benefit “workers in Liverpool, Belfast, Rosyth and Plymouth ...”

If Corbyn was honest he would entitle his programme “A modest proposal for rebuilding Britain based on World War Three.” After all, according to the Labour leader, the devastation wrought on working class communities by Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats alike is to be overcome through building up the British arms industry—still one of the world’s leading sector.

Not a single reform was offered by Corbyn to alleviate the desperate conditions confronting millions of workers after a decade of savage austerity. There was talk of increasing investment in “education, skills and lifelong learning through the National Education Service that we will create.” But this was to overcome the “short-termism” of the past that had meant that the UK was losing out to France, Germany and the US.

The class content of Corbyn’s programme was underscored by his reference to the US, and President Donald Trump. For good reason, Corbyn felt it necessary to state that his slogan, “Build It In Britain Again” was “not turning away from the world, nor some return to protectionism or Trump-style trade wars.”

He described as his “nightmare scenario” one in which “our country [is] in hock to Donald Trump whilst we all eat chlorinated chicken.”

Of Trump’s vicious anti-immigrant programme; the gestapo-like round up of migrants and separation of families; tax breaks for the super-rich and gutting of social welfare; the silence was deafening and telling.

There is nothing fundamental to distinguish Corbyn’s programme from that of the “America First” economic nationalism of Trump—save that he represents a wing of British capital offering to step up the exploitation of workers in the UK in competition with their class brothers and sisters in the US and Europe.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact