

UK Labour conference passes Brexit motion with option for “people’s vote”

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On Monday, after months of division on the Brexit policy to be adopted, Labour Party conference delegates by a large majority passed a compromise motion stating: “If we cannot get a general election, Labour must support all options remaining on the table, including campaigning for a public vote.”

The motion was the product of an intensifying struggle within the party, shown in the series of claims and counter-claims over Labour’s Brexit policy made by leading party figures during the conference’s first days.

On Monday morning, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell echoed Unite union leader Len McCluskey’s Sunday speech to the conference suggesting that any referendum on the terms of a Brexit deal should not include an option to remain in the European Union. This was a reaffirmation of Labour’s official line since the 2016 Brexit referendum vote. The party, under Jeremy Corbyn, campaigned for Remain, but its official position since then has been to respect “the result of the referendum, and Britain is leaving the EU.”

A few hours later, the Blairite shadow Brexit secretary, Sir Keir Starmer, insisted that Labour had not ruled out the option of a second referendum that could reverse the decision to leave the EU.

McDonnell then spoke again to state, “Keir is right. We are keeping all the options on the table.”

Starmer claimed Tuesday that the “confusion” was the result of fatigue on McDonnell’s part, because “John did a number of interviews yesterday...”

This is nonsense. McDonnell had been asked repeatedly for clarification of the point he was making and he had restated a position opposed to a second referendum of the issue of leaving the EU or remaining in it. The newly minted statements of “unity” and

“coming together” come in the midst of continuing bitter factional infighting over the best policy to pursue in the interests of British capital.

Starmer, speaking for the Blairites and dominant sections of British business, sees the compromise embodied in the conference motion as a step towards committing Labour to retaining membership of the EU and access to the single market and customs union.

McDonnell and the majority of those around Corbyn share the desire to maintain a relationship with the EU acceptable to British business. Corbyn dropped his lifetime opposition to the EU to campaign for Remain in 2016, but shifted to a position of “deliberate ambiguity” in its aftermath—making any shift in line dependent on a parliamentary vote on whether the deal struck with Brussels by Conservative Party Prime Minister Theresa May was acceptable in maintaining access to European markets.

The aim was to avoid alienating the broad sections of Labour’s base that supported Brexit and thus prevent the party forming a government able to rescue British imperialism from its deepening crisis. Corbyn and McDonnell fear losing vital seats in the north of England, with many deindustrialised towns and cities in Labour’s heartlands voting strongly to leave.

To counter such fears among Labour MPs, in the run-up to the party conference the Blairites commissioned a poll purporting to show that Labour could gain as many as 1.5 million additional votes by switching to a pro-EU policy—ignoring the reality of the UK’s “first past the post” voting system, in which more overall votes does not equate to more seats in parliament.

The final wording of the resolution reflected the desire to bridge these divisions, placing the issue of a general election first but then listing a second referendum as one option, should this fail. In his speech

to the conference Tuesday, Starmer pressed the advantage with an unscripted statement that “nobody is ruling out Remain as an option.” The line was not in the speech approved by Labour headquarters.

The fiercely pro-Remain *Guardian* wrote of Starmer receiving “wild applause” from conference delegates, with Martin Kettle waxing lyrical about a response that came “from deeper in the hall, and somehow also from somewhere deeper in the gut of the party conference,” which produced “cheering, prolonged and surging, and then the standing ovation.”

Sections of conference delegates did indeed stand, but others remained seated and silent. Corbyn has signaled his own readiness to switch position should the need arise. He told the BBC’s Laura Kuenssberg that Labour would decide whether to back any deal to leave the EU agreed by March 29 based on its merits.

May’s government has agreed that parliament will vote on the outcome of the talks, but only to choose between supporting her deal and leaving without one. Corbyn effectively backed Starmer in rejecting this scenario.

He said that if May’s deal was rejected by MPs, the government would “have to go back to the EU and say ‘our parliament can’t agree to this.’” He predicted the government would “collapse itself,” triggering a general election. But the option of a referendum “must be considered if and when this government collapses or its negotiations collapse,” he added.

Leading factions within the pro-Corbyn Momentum group have been maneuvering for such a change for months, working together with both the pro-Remain Another Europe is Possible and Labour for a People’s Vote groups, which were instrumental in the drafting of a majority of the 151 motions to the Labour conference on the subject of Brexit—out of a total of 272 motions.

In addition, the major trade unions are supportive of such a shift.

Earlier this month, the Trades Union Congress voted to keep the option open for a “people’s vote.” The TSSA and GMB unions have officially backed a new referendum on any Brexit deal reached, while Unite, led by McCluskey, has said the option must be considered.

The *Sunday Times* reported that plans for a snap general election in November to “solve” the Brexit dilemma were being raised by key Conservative aides

to May, prompting denials from Tory quarters. But the report comes amid rumours of a leadership challenge against May coming to a head by next March, the deadline for Britain to formally exit the EU.

Under these conditions, the British ruling class is desperate to bring Labour around to a definitively pro-EU position. Though Corbyn and McDonnell are more than ready to add to their numerous capitulations since taking the party leadership by falling into line on Brexit behind the Blairites, there is no readiness on the part of Corbyn’s opponents within the party to accept his leadership, given the mass support he has won among working people seeking a means of opposing austerity and war.

The retreats of the Corbynites will only embolden the right wing in their efforts to remove Corbyn, drive out his supporters and return Labour to the firm control of MPs and trade union bureaucrats who are deemed by the ruling class to be more reliable in safeguarding the strategic interests of British imperialism.



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