

Corbyn addresses Trades Union Congress in a display of cynicism and hypocrisy

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Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn addressed the assembled union functionaries at the annual Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Brighton Tuesday in a vain attempt to boost his left credentials among workers. He did so, however, under conditions in which he has capitulated time and again to the Remain agenda of his party's right-wing Blairites.

Faced with the most right-wing Conservative government in history, intent on pursuing a Brexit agenda that will have a devastating impact on jobs and social services, Corbyn has twice blocked a general election while offering to lead a "caretaker government" to unite all the pro-Remain opposition parties, in alliance with pro-EU Tories. Corbyn's attempts to tie workers to the Remain faction of British imperialism, which has no disagreement with the austerity agenda of Boris Johnson, earned him the praise of war criminal Tony Blair for having "behaved responsibly" and "put country first."

At the TUC, Corbyn reiterated that Labour's priority was to "first stop No Deal" Brexit and then "trigger a general election," which would be followed by a "public vote, with a credible option to leave, and the option to remain."

Dressing himself in "left" clothes, Corbyn told the audience that the next Labour government would "bring about the biggest extension of rights for workers that our country has ever seen."

"We will put power in the hands of workers," he said to applause.

This rhetoric may have been more effective had Corbyn not chosen the TUC congress as his platform. He might believe that the support of the trade unions can be spun as a pro-worker endorsement, but millions know better.

Ahead of Corbyn's address, Frances O'Grady, General Secretary of the TUC, made her own feint at a popular appeal—delivering an address on Monday in which she declared, "We are all working class now."

Evoking the memory of the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre, "When working class people put their lives on the line," she declared that politicians must "outlaw discrimination against working class people"—calling for a law to "stamp out class prejudice once and for all."

According to O'Grady, this goal is to be achieved not through the abolition of capitalism, the source of workers' increasingly brutal exploitation, and opposition to the rise of the far right and the drive to war. Nor with its replacement by socialism, a word that did not pass her lips, nor those of TUC President Mark Serwotka—but through more people joining a union and the election of a Corbyn-led Labour government.

Above all else, O'Grady called for Labour to oppose a "No deal" Brexit and to support a second referendum on European Union membership "with Remain on the ballot paper."

Corbyn will of course accede to the demands of the union bureaucracy on this issue, especially as it is the same demand as insisted on by the Blairite wing of his party and of the ruling elite they all serve.

Corbyn has rejected Deputy Labour leader Tom Watson's demand that the party commits unequivocally to Remain and a second referendum on EU membership, stating Wednesday, "It's Tom's view—I don't accept it, I don't agree with it." He would instead seek a better deal with the EU, leading "a Labour government that will bring people together, and a relationship with Europe, either in the EU or an effective trading relationship with Europe..."

However, Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer responded at the TUC Congress Wednesday by stressing that nothing definite had been decided—yet: "At the moment there is a good discussion going on but we are very united having that discussion; we don't want to shut down discussion in our party."

What Corbyn did promise the TUC heads was a central role in his administration, with a “seat at the Cabinet table” and the “rolling out” of “collective bargaining across the economy.” What this means is that Labour will work with the trade unions to suppress the class struggle and police the working class.

O’Grady represents a privileged social stratum that is far removed from the lives and concerns of the working class. According to official figures for 2018, of 100 unions, 44 union leaders received more than £100,000 in pay and other allowances a year, and 10 earned more than £150,000, including O’Grady herself. Such rates of pay put them in the top 98th and 99th percentile, with even those more modestly paid lower-ranking bureaucrats enjoying a salary that places them in the top 90th percentile.

The highest paid union bosses enjoyed an average pay increase of almost £13,000 last year—more than the annual wage of many workers. They have no material interest in replacing a social system that rewards them so handsomely compared to most working people. Protecting their privileges is what motivates them and determines their anti-working-class politics.

O’Grady’s call for workers to get a “fair share” of the wealth they create is belied by the fact that for decades the unions have negotiated cuts in pay and pensions, on the basis that this would help “save jobs”—only to do nothing when the jobs are destroyed anyway. This has led to average wages today being lower than before the 2008-2009 global financial crash.

The phenomenon of the “working poor” has become ubiquitous. In his report on the social crisis in Britain, United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, noted, “Four million workers live in poverty, an increase of more than half a million in the last five years.” One in six of those referred to food banks are working, while 60 percent of those in poverty are families in which at least one person works. Even more striking, “a shocking 2.8 million people are in families where all adults work full-time,” yet are still in poverty.

Far from manning the barricades to defend workers’ pay and conditions, the TUC and its constituent unions have done everything possible to sell out, de-mobilise and thwart workplace struggles, particularly since the election of Corbyn as Labour Party leader.

2018 saw the second lowest number of work stoppages (81) since records began in 1930; the lowest figure (79) was recorded in 2017. The number of workers involved in

disputes in 2018 (39,000) was the second lowest since 1893! This was only surpassed in 2017, which saw just 33,000 workers involved in industrial action.

The impact of these betrayals is reflected in the fact that the percentage difference between the pay of union members and non-members is rapidly falling. While the figure dropped by over 5 percent to 11.6 percent in the public sector in 2017, where union density remains relatively higher, at just 2.6 percent the gap is almost insignificant in the private sector. This also reflects the falling union membership in the private sector.

Most tellingly, union membership among young people, who face the greatest levels of exploitation, is negligible, with only 4.4 percent of those aged 16-24 belonging to a union.

Stripped of its phony rhetoric, O’Grady’s speech was an appeal by the union bureaucracy to “rebuild Britain,” a phrase she repeated three times, and which underlies the essentially nationalist outlook and programme of the trade unions.

The TUC and the Labour Party do not represent an alliance for the working class, but against the working class. Under conditions of mounting social inequality, trade war and the rise of militarism everywhere, the continued domination of the trade unions and Labour threatens a social and political disaster by depriving working people of the ability to fight collectively against the common class enemy.

Workers are beginning to recognise this and mount struggles in opposition to the trade unions, such as the Matamoros workers in Mexico, who also appealed to their North American class brothers and sisters for support. These international strivings must be given a conscious perspective and leadership that sets as its aim not the amelioration of capitalist exploitation, but its abolition.



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