

Factional warfare over Brexit dominates Labour Party conference

Robert Stevens, Chris Marsden
23 September 2019

A series of opportunist manoeuvres by party leader Jeremy Corbyn have failed to stop the descent of Labour's annual conference into bitter conflict over its policy on Brexit.

In the run-up to the opening of conference in Brighton on Saturday, Corbyn intervened to prevent a vote to abolish the position of Deputy Labour leader, held for the last four years by Tom Watson.

Watson is hated by Labour's rank-and-file for his leading role in seeking to undermine Corbyn, including playing a central role in the attempted coup to remove him as party leader in 2016.

In recent months, Watson, Shadow Brexit Secretary Keir Starmer and Shadow Foreign secretary Emily Thornberry have led efforts to ensure that Labour comes out as openly in favour of remaining in the European Union, demanding the leadership "unambiguously and unequivocally" come out in favour.

On Friday evening, Jon Lansman, the leader of the Momentum pro-Corbyn group, proposed the motion at the end of the party's leadership body, the National Executive Committee (NEC), calling for the abolition of the post of deputy leader.

Lansman acted, it appears, without consulting senior figures around Corbyn or others in Momentum, in what appears to have been a half-hearted stunt to gain some credibility among his members. Corbyn had already left the meeting and the motion was not on the agenda.

Reports of what happened are contradictory, with the *Guardian* reporting Lansman having cited Watson's "disloyalty over Brexit and his repeated demands for Labour to have a more pro-Remain position" and the *Daily Mirror* later citing a "source close to Mr Lansman ... saying he had never personally attacked the Labour deputy."

In any event, the motion was unsuccessful as the chair, Unison union president Wendy Nichols, ruled it out of

order as it required a two-thirds majority to pass. It was agreed to defer the vote to a meeting the following morning.

Corbyn then intervened to call off the scheduled vote, instead insisting the post of deputy leader should be reviewed later. "Tom is the elected deputy leader of the party and so has an important role to play," he said, telling the media that he enjoyed working with him. He did so after Tony Blair insisted that he act, as "This shows a quite extraordinary level of destructive sectarianism."

Other right-wing MPs stated that they were prepared to stand down in response in order to prepare another leadership challenge to Corbyn. The *Guardian* described how their concern was shared by a stream of union leaders "with the most strident warning coming from Dave Prentis, the Unison boss. Even staunchly pro-Corbyn union bosses privately said they had concerns about the measure."

As soon as Corbyn stepped in, Lansman gave his approval saying, "I welcome and fully support Jeremy's proposal."

Corbyn's political cowardice in not openly opposing Watson and the Blairites, combined with Lansman's posturing, allowed his opponents to portray themselves as victims of undemocratic manoeuvres—with Watson arriving at the Labour conference to a staged show of support by his party staff at Brighton railway station.

Corbyn's next attempt to avoid open conflict with the Blairites was to propose that a vote on the party's position on Brexit be postponed until after a general election and Labour had the opportunity to negotiate a deal with the EU that includes access to the Single European Market and a form of customs union.

With Corbyn suggesting that this might leave Britain better off than continued membership, the NEC approved a motion to this effect Sunday. This means that today's debate will be between the NEC position and a composite

of at least 80 motions demanding the party comes out in favour of Remain.

However this debate ends, the Blairites have been left to campaign openly for Remain at conference, with their position dominant within the party membership and Corbyn reliant on the trade union block vote for any chance of success—and only then to put off a decision.

Starmer, Clive Lewis and other frontbenchers led a pro “Remain and Reform” protest at Brighton, Saturday. Thornberry appeared at a “People’s Vote” rally Sunday in an EU coloured dress, replete with a necklace of EU stars. Watson was the star-turn, appearing before attending a Blairite fringe meeting where he was accorded a standing ovation.

It is a measure of the consequences of Corbyn’s political cowardice that two years ago he appeared at conference with his position seemingly unassailable—when after the failed coup attempt he managed to wipe out Prime Minister Theresa May’s majority in the 2017 election, leaving her to stagger on in power as a minority government. The Blairite right was unable to claim any longer that Corbyn only had the support of activists and was still unelectable because the election showed that millions of workers were desperately seeking an alternative to Tory austerity.

This year, however, with Labour languishing at least seven points behind the hated government of Boris Johnson in opinion polls and now running neck and neck in opinion polls with the anti-Brexit Liberal Democrats, Corbyn’s chances of winning the next election appear to be rapidly vanishing. And after one political capitulation after another, Corbyn is left fending off speculation that he may be forced to quit as even his innermost circle comes out against him. Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott have both said they would personally campaign for Remain in any referendum.

Corbyn was pushed further into crisis Saturday with the announcement by one of his closest advisers, Andrew Fisher, that he intends to stand down. According to the *Sunday Times*, Fisher, the “head of policy and author of the party’s last election manifesto, walked out last Saturday, declaring: ‘I no longer have faith we will succeed’.”

Fisher wrote a memo stating that members of Corbyn’s leadership team had a “lack of professionalism, competence and human decency, had made up a “blizzard of lies and excuses” and were engaged in “class war.”

McDonnell also declared Saturday, “If Jeremy got hit

by the No 57 bus, or whatever it is, there’s the next generation coming through.” The next leader should be a woman, he said, naming as candidates the Corbynites Rebecca Long-Bailey, Angela Rayner, Dawn Butler and Thornberry.

The *Guardian* suggested that after the party conference, the investigation by the Equality and Human Rights Commission into bogus accusations of Labour anti-Semitism would have grave consequences for some of Corbyn’s closest advisers and might destabilise his leadership.

Just as there is no capitulation to the right Corbyn will not carry out, so too there is nothing that his apologists will not try and excuse. On Friday evening the Skwawkbox blog confidently predicted with a “high degree of confidence” that Watson’s demise would be complete the following day. But after Corbyn’s intervention, they dutifully declared that Watson had to be saved “to avoid disruption to the party’s focus on winning the coming general election.”

“Jeremy is acting as peacemaker because he knows a Labour government has to come before anything,” Skwawkbox wrote. “It’s a blow, but we need everyone talking about Labour’s policies, not about Watson.”

For its part, the *Socialist Worker* followed a pathetic complaint that “After a full year of forcing concessions from Corbyn over Brexit, Watson can stride around conference undermining him without any consequences” with reports of a silver lining provided by Corbyn’s speech to supporters on Saturday night “with enthusiastic, full-throated support for the climate strikes last Friday.”

Corbyn said that “the climate change demonstrations were ‘really quite amazing’ and had ‘a massive effect’,” the *Socialist Worker* noted, offering its hope that “supporting that movement could break out of Labour’s Brexit quagmire.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact