

# UK: Factional warfare in Corbyn leadership after McDonnell allies with Blairites over Brexit

Chris Marsden  
15 October 2019

Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell is staging a “coup” against Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, according to numerous media reports.

The *Sunday Times* describes McDonnell as Labour’s “leader in all but name,” having “assumed control of the party amid claims that Jeremy Corbyn is preparing to step down.” This includes being “in daily charge of the Labour operation as the party moves to an election footing,” launching “his own policy platform” and drawing up “a list of appointments he wants in the leader of the opposition’s office, known as LOTO, to surround Corbyn with his allies.”

The *Sun* calls this sordid manoeuvring a “Red Revolt.”

Notwithstanding the pro-Tory motives behind much of this coverage, McDonnell and his allies are openly scheming against Corbyn’s central political advisors in the Leader of the Opposition team. They are allying themselves with Labour deputy leader Tom Watson and Shadow Brexit Secretary Sir Keir Starmer in efforts to commit Labour to a second referendum on leaving the European Union (EU) prior to any general election.

This brings McDonnell into conflict with both Corbyn and Labour’s membership, given that an attempt by the Blairites to make this position the policy of the party at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton last month was rejected by the delegates. Corbyn’s preferred resolution saying that a referendum would only follow an attempt to renegotiate Brexit by an incoming Labour government won easily. This has forced McDonnell to move into an increasingly open alliance with the Blairites. Moreover, this conflict could go much further and lead to a move against Corbyn’s leadership.

McDonnell has already made public that he would back remaining in the EU, even against a Labour-negotiated Brexit deal. But in the aftermath of the conference vote backing Corbyn’s position, he has gone as far as possible in solidarising himself with Watson et al. without making a public break with Corbyn. This began behind the scenes

with moves to shift out some of Corbyn’s key advisors.

Prior to Labour’s conference, Andrew Fisher, one of Corbyn’s most senior aides, resigned after denouncing his former colleagues for a “lack of professionalism, competence and human decency,” accusing them of making up a “blizzard of lies and excuses” and engaging in “class war.” His targets included Corbyn’s chief of staff Karie Murphy and Seumas Milne, his Stalinist director of communications and strategy.

McDonnell was incensed, having urged Corbyn, with the support of Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott, to ditch Murphy and move the party towards an explicit pro-Remain position. He then joined with Corbyn in thwarting moves at conference to remove Watson as deputy, which Murphy was said to have initiated.

Two weeks later, Murphy was removed from her post and transferred to party headquarters to work on the election campaign—under McDonnell’s control—along with two other key advisors. Presiding over the political execution was Lord Kerslake, a former head of the civil service and key McDonnell ally.

Murphy is closely associated with the website *Skwawkbox*, which has run a series of bitter denunciations of McDonnell. Charges levelled against him include supporting a plan “pushed by Tom Watson to delay a general election for months and push for a referendum to be held first... driven by an awareness that a general election will not help remainers because of remain’s unpopularity in a majority of Labour constituencies—and, many believe, by a desire to reduce Labour’s electability in order to remove Corbyn.”

McDonnell is accused of targeting Murphy, who is described as “Corbyn’s firewall,” who “shovelled the s\*\*t everyone else was either too timid and/or too self-interested to touch.”

According to internal memos that were also sent to Sky News, 30 LOTO staff face “informal” interviews, which, according to *Skwawkbox*, “could affect whether they have a

job.” The interviews have been organized by Kerslake, Starmer and newly appointed office manager John Healey.

The behind-the-scenes skulduggery is matched by McDonnell’s debased public utterances in favour of cementing his alliance with the Blairites.

This month he was interviewed in *GQ* magazine by Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s hatchet man and a fellow war criminal most closely associated with the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He was finally expelled from the Labour Party after voting for the Liberal Democrats in this year’s European elections.

On film, McDonnell positively revels in spitting in the face of the many workers and youth who looked to Corbyn and himself to lead a fight against the Blairites. Campbell asks, “Is Tony Blair a war criminal?” to which McDonnell replies immediately, “No! No!”

He is then asked whether he supported Campbell’s expulsion, to which he replies, “No... Come back, Alastair, all is forgiven!”

Getting down to the business of Brexit, Campbell asks McDonnell, “Do you agree with me that there shouldn’t be an election?” He replies, “Let’s see what actually parliament will wear in the end... whatever we do we’ve got to block no deal, whichever is the best route. I don’t think there is any doubt about a referendum. If it was a general election first or a referendum first, it doesn’t matter.”

He reassures Campbell that if Labour does win a general election, both the Blairite right wing and the ruling class have nothing to fear.

He declares that the move against Tom Watson was “a fiasco” that happened only because “Jeremy wasn’t aware... and when he became aware, he intervened.” Political disagreements with Watson were in fact “part of the joys of life.”

For big business, Corbyn, McDonnell stressed, is “the best form of protection” as “a leader who is a consensus builder that brings people together, whether it is Brexit or other issues...” He continued: “On the income tax stuff... We’re not going to penalise people even in that top five per cent heavily. We want to bring people with us as much as we can.”

On his previous comments that private fee-paying schools “should not exist,” McDonnell told Campbell, “This idea that was brought forward [by delegates at Labour’s conference] that you expropriate the land [of the private school] and all that sort of thing, I explain to people, ‘well, that’s virtually impossible to do anyway.’”

McDonnell concludes by pledging that if Labour loses, both he and Corbyn will step aside for a new leader, who “has got to be a woman.”

It remains to be seen whether McDonnell will wait for a

general election before moving against Corbyn. The shadow chancellor, who has spent years wooing the City of London and who now courts Campbell and Watson, has even been mooted as a potential replacement for Corbyn and acceptable front-man for a “caretaker government” to prevent Brexit. But none of this may be necessary.

Corbyn’s immediate response to McDonnell’s interview has consisted of a declaration to Sky News’s Sophy Ridge on Sunday that he is “leading this party to go into an election” for which “We are ready... at any time.” However, *Skwawkbox* says more than it might wish when describing moves against Corbyn as designed to either “isolate and destroy Jeremy,” or “so they can control him.”

Corbyn has proved again and again how easily he can be controlled and how obliging he is to the demands of his supposed opponents. If he is removed, it will not be as the “victim” of political disloyalty, from either the Blairites or his own allies. He is the architect of his own fate.

Since being elected Labour leader in 2016, Corbyn has served as the main political defender of the Blairites from the wrath of rank-and-file party members, even as his own allies such as Ken Livingstone, Jackie Walker, Marc Wadsworth and Chris Williamson were witch-hunted out of the party. Despite his supposed “desire” for a general election, Corbyn has abandoned all calls for an election in furtherance of building an alliance with the pro-Remain opposition parties.

This Saturday, parliament will meet in special session to decide how to respond either to a Brexit deal proposed by Prime Minister Boris Johnson or a failure to secure a Brexit agreement. The pro-Remain alliance will then have to decide whether it can best block Brexit by retaining the services of the highly malleable Mr Corbyn or by dispensing with them. As for the working class, Corbyn has proved long ago that his proposed road forward of pushing Labour to the left is a political dead-end.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**