

# Corbyn and main union backer McCluskey oppose Labour conference free movement pledge on immigration

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Unite trade union leader Len McCluskey said this week that he expected Labour to take an anti-immigration stance in opposition to the free movement of labour in its manifesto to be published next week.

McCluskey is a long-time backer of curtailing immigration rights for foreign workers. He heads the largest union affiliate to the Labour Party which is also its biggest single donor. Last year Unite donated £490,300 to Labour.

He told the *Guardian*, “It’s wrong in my view to have any greater free movement of labour unless you get stricter labour market regulation.” Speaking about the causes of the 2016 vote to leave the European Union, he said a main “reason was migrant labour coming to the UK from Europe. If you don’t understand those concerns, you fail to grasp the divisions that exist.”

Attempting to strike a pro-worker pose, he added, “Migrant workers are to blame for absolutely nothing in this country. They are just trying to better their lives and the lives of their families. It’s the greedy bosses that are using them to undercut pay and conditions.”

McCluskey then claimed that advocating anti-immigration measures was what “white” workers insist on. In the name of combating the far-right, he urged backing for its policies: “If we don’t deal with the issues and concerns, we will create a vacuum that will be filled by a far right seeking to become the voice of the white working class.”

The trade union bureaucracy has always portrayed foreign workers as hostile competitors rather than allies in the struggle against capitalism. For its part Labour has always competed with the Tories as to who has the most effective anti-immigration policy that still meets the needs of the employers for skilled or cheap labour—the considerations shaping its policy of “managed migration.”

Labour’s 2017 general election manifesto read, “Labour believes in fair rules and reasonable management of migration” as its alternative to supporting the free movement of labour.

McCluskey said, “We will have to see what’s in the manifesto, but I don’t think [what conference voted for] is a sensible approach and I will be expressing that view.” Labour’s manifesto is to be finalised on Saturday at a meeting of its “Clause V” committee. There is no doubt that it will be McCluskey’s position that makes the cut and not that voted for by delegates at September’s annual conference.

Conference delegates adopted a motion to maintain and extend “free movement rights,” and an end to the “hostile environment” policies against immigrants championed by Theresa May’s Tory government. It declared that “free movement, equality and rights for migrants are socialist values and benefit us all.” It committed a future Labour government to closing all 10 immigration detention centres where thousands of refugees and asylum seekers are held indefinitely, ending caps and targets on net immigration and removing the requirement that economic migrants should be able to support themselves through promised work or accumulated funds. It backed an equal right to vote for all British residents, regardless of their national origin.

McCluskey’s intervention was a direct riposte to Conservative Home Secretary Priti Patel, who has announced that freedom of movement will end with Brexit and immigration levels slashed. She wrote to Shadow Home Secretary Dianne Abbott stating, “I have grave concerns over the policy agreed at your conference which would place enormous strain on our public services and represent a considerable departure from our democratic norms, or indeed to norms of any western-

style democracy.

“Analysis shows that it [Labour’s policy] could lead to a trebling of net migration into the UK to 840,000 people per year...”

But McCluskey is in fact late in expressing his opposition to Labour’s conference proposals. He intervened not to oppose Jeremy Corbyn, but to ensure that it is the Labour leader’s own position that is reflected in this year’s election manifesto. Corbyn is a lifetime advocate of the Stalinist position on immigration issues, which, like the trade union bureaucracy and the labour left as a whole, is based on economic nationalism—even when combined with holiday sermonising about international workers’ unity. His positions are shared and shaped by his core leadership coterie, including the Stalinists Seamus Milne and Andrew Murray.

As soon as the conference vote was passed, it was pounced on by Abbott, who confirmed that Labour would not abolish immigration controls but would operate a work visa system. Speaking to the BBC’s Today show, she said that Labour in power would renegotiate a new Brexit deal with the EU and as “part of that renegotiation, although we’re saying that people who have been granted freedom of movement rights up to now will keep those rights, we have to look at the question of freedom of movement. Because it’s all in with your trade negotiations.”

Abbott was supported by Tony Blair’s former home secretary, David Blunkett, who has long been a ferocious advocate of tighter immigration controls and specialises in vomiting up anti-migrant rhetoric. Blunkett derided the conference resolution in the pro-Tory *Daily Mail* as a “ridiculous proposal” that “drives a coach and horses through efforts by all parties to devise a fair and workable immigration system in the post-Brexit era, one that balances the needs of the economy with the sensitivities of ordinary Britons living in ethnically mixed communities.”

He asked, “[W]hat could be worse than a policy announcement by Labour suggesting that a party on the verge of government is about to junk many safeguards, ushering in a fresh wave of unfettered immigration based on little more than the ability to stamp your feet on British soil?”

A man without a democratic bone in his body, Blunkett wrote, “In the past, Labour’s National Executive Committee and the leadership would have resisted conference resolutions with stupid things in them.” But he also made clear he understood that, in the end, Corbyn

would quietly do what was expected of him. “Jeremy Corbyn has decided not to oppose anything at conference—and then clarify or finesse the result afterwards.” He wrote, “Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott was rowing back on this barmy motion yesterday, implying in a BBC interview that she would pretty much ignore it... Jeremy always says he will do what conference tells him—and then doesn’t.”

Asked about McCluskey’s comments while campaigning in Scotland, Corbyn himself said opaquely, “We’re going to have our clause V meeting at the weekend and no doubt that issue is going to be discussed there.” He later told the BBC that the manifesto would not include “necessarily every last dot and comma of every resolution passed at conference.”

Labour’s anti-immigration stance will be unveiled less than a month after the horrific discovery of 39 dead Vietnamese workers, who suffocated to death in the back of a refrigerated container truck in Essex. This gruesome event highlighted the enormous obstacles facing the working class—particularly its most oppressed sections in the most impoverished countries—who flee their homes in search of a better life in the major imperialist centres.

After the crocodile tears shed over the deaths, Labour is formulating policies on “managed migration” that will drive thousands more to risk their lives seeking shelter from imperialist wars or a lifetime of grinding poverty. It will only aid the Tories and the far-right in their constant efforts to scapegoat migrants for the lack of decent jobs, the destruction of essential services and the worsening social crisis created by capitalism.

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[31 January 2019]



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