Rebecca Long-Bailey Labour leadership campaign marks end of “project Corbyn”

Robert Stevens
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The nominally “left” candidate in the Labour Party leadership contest, Rebecca-Long Bailey, launched her campaign at the Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester Friday. The event confirmed that four years of Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership have changed nothing fundamental about the Labour Party.

Not only does Labour continue to be politically dominated by the Blairites, but should Long-Bailey succeed her mentor then she would do their bidding all down the line. Unity with the Blairite right was the leitmotif of Long-Bailey’s campaign rally. Before she took to the stage, the Salford and Eccles MP was introduced by Kim Johnson, MP for Liverpool Riverside, who made no less than three appeals for unity with the right in just five minutes:

“We don’t want to create any more diversions; we need to come together to support our party. We are broad church, and we can agree to disagree,” she declared. We need to “understand what needs to be done to bring the party together.” “Whoever wins the [leadership] election, the disunity of the past four years needs to be put behind us, and we have to unite behind our common and shared values.”

Long-Bailey, a 40-year-old former solicitor, has no connections with any struggle waged by the working class. To conceal this fact, her handlers—led by Jon Lansman of the pro-Corbyn Momentum group—have concocted a fictional biography that rings hollow as soon as the words written for her are uttered.

Long-Bailey told the audience that “it was more than 30 years ago, that as a little girl I came here to the science and industry museum.”

This extraordinary museum trip apparently imbued her with a profound understanding of the history of the labour movement—“From 18th century cotton spinning, to the Victorian steam engines to the birth of flight, the first computer and space travel. It was like the history of human progress. … The history of Salford and Manchester was about the Chartists, the trade unions, the Pankhursts. The history of our cities was the history of struggle, of solidarity, of social and economic progress on an unstoppable journey upwards.”

Long-Bailey was nine-years-old or younger when this vision of the sweep of the workers’ movement and fight for democratic rights from the 1830s and Chartism to the suffragettes in the 20th century supposedly struck her. She previously cited her concern over her father losing his job on Salford’s docks, in 1982, when she was two years old.

The truth is that when Long-Bailey was nine, her father got a job at an oil refinery near Ellesmere Port in the county of Cheshire, and the rest of her childhood was spent in the prosperous market town of Frodsham.

Aside from such working-class window dressing, the most significant biographical reference made in Long-Bailey’s speech was her assertion that “I also learnt my politics in May 1997 when just walking down the street and literally seeing people with a spring in their step with hope for the future again.”

This positive reference to Tony Blair’s New Labour government, elected after 18 years of Tory rule, was calculated to reach out to the present-day Blairites and echoes her main right-wing competitor, Sir Keir Starmer, who has insisted, “We are not going to trash the last Labour government.”

For 13 years, Blair and then Gordon Brown continued Thatcher’s policies, overseeing record levels of inequality—with Blair’s adviser Peter Mandelson becoming notorious for his statement that Labour was “intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich.” Blair is despised for dragging Britain into an illegal war in Iraq that led to the deaths of over one million people.

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But Long-Bailey draws a veil over all of this, quietly shelving statements made earlier in her political career of how she opposed Blair's war on Iraq as a politics student. True or not, Long-Bailey's supposedly intense interest in political history did not lead her to join the Labour Party or do anything remotely political. She left university to train to be a solicitor and pursue a legal career specialising in commercial property and National Health Service contracts and only joined the Labour Party "around 2010," before becoming an MP just five years ago.

Long-Bailey owes her subsequent political career to Corbyn, who won the leadership in September 2015 months after she became an MP. But on this score her main concern is to distance herself from her mentor—repeatedly rejecting descriptions of herself as the Corbyn "continuity" candidate to curry favour with the Blairites.

However, even her grovelling self-abnegation reeks of true continuity with Corbyn, whose record consists of employing a smattering of left-phraseology to position himself as a block on rank-and-file demands for the expulsion of the Blairite right while he adapted himself to their every programmatic demand.

The problem for Long-Bailey is she is attempting to take over as the voice of the "Labour left" just weeks after the ignominious collapse of the entire Corbyn project and the landslide election of Boris Johnson's Tories. A couple of hundred inveterate Labour opportunists and a few naïve middle-class youth might be induced to sing Long-Bailey's praises at a party launch meeting, but she has no political standing in the working class.

The millions of workers and young people who turned away from Labour in December after taking Corbyn's real measure will hardly be attracted to the "Corbyn-lite" persona of Long-Bailey. Corbyn at least had the advantage of decades as a backbencher during which he dutifully proclaimed his loyal opposition to the worst political crimes of Labour's right-wing. Long-Bailey can only rely on her gender and a few phrases about a "green industrial revolution" to mask her essential agreement with the Blairites.

Her speech in Manchester was even replete with Blair-style appeals to the "aspirational" voter. In answer to a question from the *Financial Times* about what she meant by getting the "basics" right, Long-Bailey again disavowed Corbyn, saying Labour's election "manifesto didn't resonate and what we should have been talking about is aspiration. … We talked quite a lot about individual policies in relation to health care, etc. … but we didn't match that with a message of aspiration."

The following evening, Long-Bailey and the four other leadership candidates—Starmer, Emily Thornberry, Lisa Nandy and Jess Phillips, took part in a hustings in Liverpool. Long-Bailey stressed again that her focus was on party unity. Asked how she would "unite the Labour Party and put a stop to factionalism," she replied, "Over the last four years we haven't been united as a party and united parties win elections and disunited parties don't … we've got to recognise that the point of the Labour Party was that it was established to bring together all views across the centre left of politics."

Growing numbers of Labour Party members who joined believing that Corbyn would shift the party to the left are despairing at the wreckage they confront, with the Blairites again on the rampage. Some have already decided to leave or are considering doing so. Should Long-Bailey become leader, those foolish enough to stay could find her signing off on their expulsion—as evidenced by her signing up to the 10 pledges of the Board of Deputies of British Jews stipulating that anyone accused of anti-Semitism, based on their opposition to Israeli-repression of the Palestinians, will be expelled, along with anyone who dares defend them from expulsion.

Lansman knows there is no popular enthusiasm for Long-Bailey. For this reason, he organised a "poll" of Momentum's membership offering the "choice" of either backing Long-Bailey or no one. Just 7,395 (18 percent) of Momentum's 40,000 members participated and Long-Bailey won just 70 percent of the vote. When members were asked to vote for Long-Bailey's running mate Angela Rayner as deputy leader, only 52 percent did so—with almost half abstaining in disgust.

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