

UK: Corbyn's pathetic exit as Labour leader amid coronavirus crisis

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Jeremy Corbyn made his final parliamentary appearance as Labour Party leader Wednesday, during an extended session of Prime Minister's Questions focused on the coronavirus crisis.

His abject performance provided final proof not only of his personal political bankruptcy, but of the claim that his becoming leader represented a rebirth of Labour and a chance for workers to defend their interests through a return to a national reformist policy.

The final session of parliament took place amid an explosion of infections and deaths from Covid-19, reports that hospitals in London face a "tsunami" of seriously ill patients and infection rates among medical staff of 30 percent, 40 percent and sometimes 50 percent and workers losing their jobs or forced to continue to go to work with no safety provisions, endangering themselves and their loved ones.

But whereas Corbyn raised various issues that have fuelled widespread public outrage—the lack of Covid-19 testing and of personal protection equipment for medical staff, the threat of evictions, no income support for the self-employed—he offered nothing but appeals to Boris Johnson's Conservative government to provide a little more assistance.

No criticism was made of the massive £350 billion handout to the corporations and banks. No mention of the fact that four decades of class war policies against the working class were responsible for the threatened collapse of the National Health Service (NHS) and other essential services. No demand for big business to foot the bill for workers laid off for weeks on end, let alone for essential industries and services such as transport to be taken into public ownership. Above all there was no call for a struggle by the working class for socialism, even as capitalism is falling apart at the seams.

Instead, Corbyn strained every sinew to appear responsible and supportive at a time of national emergency, stressing that he did not want to appear to be "relentlessly negative." His last exchange with Johnson was a declaration in favour of national unity. Even after detailing innumerable examples of how the Conservative government was abandoning workers to their fate, Corbyn insisted, "At a time of crisis, no one is an island, no one is self-made. The wellbeing of the wealthiest corporate chief executive officer depends on the outsourced worker cleaning their office. At times like this, we have to recognise the value of each other and the strength of a society that cares for each other and cares for all."

Johnson was more than happy to "associate myself fully with the

closing words of the Leader of the Opposition."

"We are coming together as a nation," he proclaimed, before insisting that the working class will be expected to pay: "We all understand that that will involve a sacrifice... The most important point I can make to the House today is that that sacrifice is inevitable and necessary..."

Johnson began PMQs by praising Corbyn "for his service to his party and, indeed, to the country," before thanking "him and all his colleagues for their co-operation in the current emergency as far as possible across party lines."

Corbyn had no problem with being praised for Labour's political collusion with the Tories, but complained that Johnson "was talking as though this was a sort of obituary... my voice will not be stilled, I will be around, I will be campaigning..."

Corbyn has in fact spent the past four and a half years writing his own political obituary, one defined by abject betrayal of the overwhelming mandate to end the era of Labour's Blairite pro-business policies of support for austerity and imperialist militarism.

He and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell instructed Labour councils to continue enforcing the savage cuts demanded by the Tory government. They worked with the trade union bureaucracy to demobilise strikes and protests, presiding over a collapse of workers' living standards, even as they wooed the City of London in a "tea and biscuits" offensive.

As for Corbyn's anti-imperialist credentials, the former head of the Stop the War Coalition will be remembered for granting the Blairite warmongers a free vote on the decision to bomb Syria, then leading Labour into the 2017 and 2019 general elections on a manifesto committed to spending at least 2 percent of GDP on the military, NATO membership and maintaining the UK's nuclear weapons arsenal.

He leaves behind a party firmly controlled by the right wing, with the former Director of Public Prosecutions, Sir Keir Starmer—who worked with the US to prevent Sweden dropping its extradition demand against Wikileaks founder Julian Assange—set to officially replace him in April. The designated flagbearer of the "left", Rebecca Long-Bailey, will sit loyally in Starmer's shadow cabinet where she will champion an agenda she has defined as "progressive patriotism."

The Socialist Equality Party warned from the outset that such a political shipwreck was inevitable. Prior to his election as party leader in September 2015, we wrote that "those looking to a

Corbyn victory to provide an alternative to austerity will be cruelly disappointed.”

No change of leader, nor even an influx of left-leaning members, we stressed, could change the historically and programmatically determined character of the Labour Party: “Labour is a right-wing bourgeois party. It is complicit in all the crimes of British imperialism and has functioned as the principal political opponent of socialism for more than a century.”

Our party congress resolution of November 2016, “Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party: The strategic lessons,” explained that Labour’s rightward lurch was not simply the product of bad leaders such as Tony Blair, but had profound objective roots in fundamental shifts within world capitalism associated with globalisation which had “dramatically undermined” the viability of the old labour organisations that were “embedded in the nation-state system,” leading to their transformation into “direct instruments of imperialism.”

In contrast, Britain’s main pseudo-left groups, the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party enthusiastically boosted Corbyn—sowing political confusion in the working class in order to maintain the grip of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and their ability to suppress the class struggle.

The Socialist Party defined the “Corbyn insurgency” as “an attempt to turn back the wheel of history, to re-establish a new workers’ party.” For this to succeed, they argued for a rerun of events at the turn of the 20th century, above all re-establishing “the central role of the trade unions, recognising their importance as the collective voice of millions of workers” and allowing the SP to affiliate to Labour.

Their whitewash of the trade unions was epitomised by the assertion, “The capitalist media dismiss their role within Labour as being power to a few ‘union barons’, ignoring that these so-called barons have been elected through the unions’ democratic structures.” The SP insisted that the revitalised Labour Party would “still be a ‘broad church’, in the sense that it would inevitably contain groupings with different political approaches.”

For its part, the SWP proclaimed Corbyn as proof of “the persistence of Labour.” Donny Gluckstein, in “The rebirth of social democracy” published by the SWP in June 2016, explained that Corbyn’s ascendancy was “the repeat of a cycle driven by contradictions within mass consciousness” which was of necessity reformist.

“In the late 19th century this gave birth to social democracy which ran out of steam 100 years later. Today the forces behind that evolution have reappeared...” The reformist consciousness of workers, he wrote, “supplies an eternal wellspring of mass reformist potential.”

Gluckstein ruled out any possibility of Marxists changing this situation through a fight for socialist consciousness and winning the leadership of the working class. The history of the 20th century, except briefly and abortively in Russia, was portrayed as a hopeless attempt by revolutionaries to “win the majority” away from reformism.

History presented itself as a cycle of reformist “birth,” “Traumatic adolescence” (covering the first half of the 20th century, including the Russian Revolution, the German revolution,

the victory of fascism, the Spanish civil war and World War II!), a “coming of age”—the decades following the second World War that were a supposed “reformist golden age”, through to “Decrepit old age” in which reformism appeared incapable of producing reforms and ended in the formation of New Labour.

But rather than old age signalling the imminence of death, Corbyn’s rise proved instead that “Old age prepares the way for new birth... The wellspring that gave life to social democracy long ago still pours forth and will find a channel for expression if given the opportunity, whether that be in Syriza, Corbyn or another vessel. What we are witnessing, therefore, is an episode not dissimilar to the late 19th century.”

Such is the complacent and reactionary objectivism propounded by the pseudo-left, in which Marxist phrases are employed only to provide a rationale and benediction for the treachery of the bureaucracy and defeat of revolutionary struggle.

The working class is not doomed to an endless cycle of betrayal due to its lack of socialist consciousness. Rather, in the past decade, workers have passed through immense consciousness-changing experiences with the parties hailed by the pseudo-left as the wave of the future, including with Syriza in Greece and with “Corbynism” in the UK.

These experiences have had a profound impact on how workers think about their existing leaderships, which is to become increasingly hostile towards them. This has already been expressed in the mass protests and strikes worldwide against austerity and social inequality that erupted last year, which developed outside of these organisations.

The coronavirus crisis will not stop this development and produce the sentiment for “national unity” so desired by Corbyn and Johnson. Rather, even as yesterday’s man Corbyn skulks off to the backbenches, the escalated gutting of social wealth by the corporate elite, the calculated indifference of governments to the fate of millions and the self-evident failure of capitalism is paving the way for a turn to revolutionary socialism by the working class. It is the task of the SEP to provide the historically derived programme and leadership necessary for the coming struggles.



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