

New UK Labour leader Keir Starmer offers national unity with Tory government

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The first act of newly elected Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer was to agree cooperation with Boris Johnson's Conservative government for the duration of the coronavirus crisis.

Starmer's embrace of Johnson's vicious anti-working-class government confirms that outgoing leader Jeremy Corbyn has presided over a massive shift to the right in official politics, with grave implications for the working class.

Almost five years after Corbyn was elected party leader in 2015 promising to end Labour's pro-business, pro-austerity, pro-war agenda, the Blairites are back in the saddle and contemplating moves that even Tony Blair would have considered political suicide. Corbyn's constant retreats on all fundamental issues—demanding Labour councils impose austerity, agreeing a free vote on war against Syria, backing NATO membership and retaining nuclear weapons—together with his cowardly refusal to oppose the witch-hunting of his supporters have ended in a debacle.

Workers have deserted Labour in droves, and the hundreds of thousands who joined to twice elect him leader have been left angry and disenfranchised. As a result, almost 300,000 eligible voters abstained in the leadership ballot and many are now quitting a party that is as pro-imperialist as it ever was.

Starmer easily won on the first round, with 56 percent of the vote, while Rebecca Long-Bailey, the nominal left candidate, came second with just 27.6 percent. Angela Rayner was comfortably elected as deputy leader, while all three contested posts on the National Executive Committee were won by right-wingers.

Immediately prior to the result announcement Saturday, Johnson invited all opposition leaders to a coronavirus briefing at Number 10, stating, "As party leaders we have a duty to work together during this time of national emergency."

Starmer was ready with a pre-prepared response. His filmed victory statement declared, "Our willingness to come together like this as a nation has been lying dormant for too long... Under my leadership we will engage constructively with the government, not opposition for opposition's sake. Not scoring party political points or making impossible demands. But with the courage to support where that's the right thing to do."

Starmer's next step was to ring Johnson, with a spokesperson explaining that he had "offered to work constructively with the government" and agreed "arrangements for privy council briefings and discussions" going forward.

While extending an olive branch to the Tories, Starmer made clear that the witch-hunting of hundreds of left-leaning Labour members as anti-Semites would be stepped up. "Antisemitism has been a stain on our party," he claimed. "And I will tear out this poison by its roots..."

Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times* predicted last week that Starmer would "purge Jeremy Corbyn's allies in the shadow cabinet and party headquarters within weeks of becoming Labour leader." This week, the newspaper's deputy editor Sarah Baxter wrote that Starmer will be judged by the ruling class by whether he will "send packing the Marxists, the ultra-leftists and the anti-Semites who flocked to Corbyn's banner."

To all intents, the Labour Party is now in a government of national unity with the Tories, though it hasn't yet been formalised, given the readiness of Labour to do whatever is demanded of it. But yesterday's announcement that Johnson was taken to hospital continuing to suffer from COVID-19 could accelerate discussions on a national unity government.

Labour will do all it can to reinforce the message that the working class must accept the erosion of its democratic rights now proceeding under the pretext of combating the coronavirus. It will insist there must be no

challenging a government that has handed over £370 billion to the banks and corporations, even as Johnson's weeks of inaction on COVID-19 and swingeing cuts to the NHS and care services are leading to thousands of needless deaths.

A "national unity" strategy has all been discussed behind closed doors and in the media for weeks, in a brazen political conspiracy against the working class.

The pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* editorialised March 18, "Everyone, including the Opposition, needs to row in the same direction. Perhaps a cross-party War Cabinet is required." George Freeman, a former minister in Johnson's government, told the *Guardian* March 24, "The scale of this national emergency... demands a suspension of politics as usual. When Labour have a sensible new leader, Keir Starmer [if elected] should be invited to COVID cabinet, Cobra and joint No 10 briefings."

The various advocates of national unity repeatedly cite Winston Churchill's wartime coalition with Labour under Clement Attlee as their example. However, today's collusion between Labour and the Tories is not motivated by a supposed "war on the coronavirus," but in furtherance of an ongoing war against the working class. As one leading supporter of Starmer told the *Financial Times*, "The precedent for Attlee is not a bad one... If bodies start to mount up in a serious way and lockdown has to continue and we start to see civil unrest... Johnson might say, 'Why don't you come in and help us?'"

None of this will end with COVID-19 being brought under control. Hundreds of thousands have already lost their jobs. Millions more are threatened. Moreover, as was the case with the 2008 bailout, the massive sums handed over to the corporate elite in the past weeks are to be paid for through stepped up austerity and imposing savage levels of exploitation in the factories and workplaces. Once the anticipated surge in COVID-19 cases has passed, Labour will back the government in any moves to suppress rising social discontent at a time of continued "national emergency."

No opposition will be forthcoming from the supposed Labour "left," whose impotence and cowardice found such perfect embodiment in Corbyn. His self-declared successor, Long-Bailey, already indicated she is ready to join a national unity government, telling Sky TV before the ballot result was announced, "I've already been collaborating with the government and urging them to listen to my advice and the advice of my colleagues in tackling this crisis, because we want to be as helpful as possible... We're trying to help and that's what I'll do as

leader, and that's what I'll do if I'm not leader, if I'm supporting a new leader."

The Labour Party is dead as far as the working class is concerned. Workers and youth must now strike out on a new path—class struggle and the fight for socialism. The Socialist Equality Party calls on working people to join us in rejecting all appeals for national unity, which are used to justify imposing savage attacks on jobs, wages and democratic rights. Workers must demand:

- An end to the bailout of the banks and corporations. Public money must be directed towards fighting the pandemic, providing the necessary resources to the NHS and care sector and safeguarding the jobs and livelihoods of working people.

- Seize the wealth of the super-rich. Take the banks and corporations into public ownership without compensation to fund essential social protections.

- No job and wage cuts. Freeze mortgages, rents and utility payments for the duration of the pandemic. Place production under the democratic control of the working class.

- No confidence in the trade unions, which are tools of the government and the employers. Form rank-and-file committees in every workplace and neighbourhood.

Combating COVID-19, global warming, war and other existential threats to life demands intensive and planned collaboration between the peoples of the world, including their scientists and other experts. But this means ending the division of the world into antagonistic nation states based upon production for private profit, not social need, through the worldwide revolutionary transfer of political power from the capitalist class to the working class.



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