

Jeremy Corbyn discovers the class struggle—and opposes it

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On Monday evening, MPs from the Socialist Campaign Group (SCG) issued a statement through Twitter denouncing the government’s coronavirus policy as “class war.” Its 17 signatories include former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, former Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott, and former Shadow Justice Minister Richard Burgon. The brief statement begins by declaring: “Last night’s statement by the Prime Minister was a thinly veiled declaration of class war from a government that has chosen to put the economic demands of some sections of big business above the welfare of the country.”

It decries Boris Johnson’s Conservative government “calling on people to be ‘actively encouraged’ to return to work,” before offering as an answer:

“There has never been a more important time to either join or become more active in a trade union. Please do so. ... Wherever trade unions are forced to step in to take action against bosses who put their members’ health at risk they will have our full and unwavering support.”

Corbyn’s cheerleaders in the *Morning Star*, the *Canary*, *Skwawkbox* and *Socialist Appeal* jumped for joy, echoing the theme of a *New Statesman* article written last month asserting that “The left’s resistance to Starmer is taking shape.”

What a farce. Far from proving the revival of the “Labour left,” the SCG’s “rebellion on its knees” confirms that it is dead and will never rise again.

For five years, Corbyn and his allies held the leadership of the Labour Party and won enough support among workers and young people to give Labour the largest membership of any party in Europe. From this vantage point, moreover, Corbyn was able to lead the party in two general elections. During this time, the

phrase “class struggle” did not once pass Corbyn’s lips as he posed as Britain’s St. Francis of Assisi, dedicated to “a kinder politics, a more caring society” that would end class antagonisms. Wealth creation is a “collective endeavour—between investors, workers, public services, and government,” proclaimed Labour’s 2017 election manifesto.

Only now that the SCG has been returned to its former position of an ineffectual, stunted rump does it declare (in a tweet!) that the government is conducting “class war.”

What explains this volte-face? If Corbyn had made such a statement against the Tories as party leader, he would have been universally denounced by Labour’s Blairite MPs. This would have spurred on the demand by his supporters for the expulsion of these political scoundrels, when Corbyn’s primary goal was to protect the party apparatus from popular opposition.

When it was possible that Corbyn invoking the class war might spark a movement by workers against the Tory government and the Blairites, all he ever spoke of was national unity and party unity. Only now that he and his cohorts, McDonnell, Abbott, Burgon et al, are safely ensconced on the backbenches is the “class war” rediscovered—and then only to complain that Johnson is waging it rather than acting in the national interest!

Neither is there a world of criticism from the SCG directed against the response of Corbyn’s replacement as party leader, Sir Keir Starmer, to Johnson’s “declaration of class war.”

Just a few hours before the SCG’s statement was released, Starmer said in a national broadcast, “Whether we voted for this government or not, at this moment of national crisis, we all rely on the government to get this right. That’s why we’ve called for a national consensus.” The Labour Party, he

continued, “remain committed to working constructively with the government in the national interest.”

Keeping true to his earlier promise not to “ask the impossible,” the Labour leader refused to call for a rent holiday during the lockdown, saying this would force the government to compensate landlords, and barred the announcement of any public spending plans. Starmer is waging the class war against workers in lockstep with Johnson, while Corbyn and his allies maintain a diplomatic silence. Whatever verbal shift to the left is made, loyalty to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy is the watchword of the SCG.

The main activity of the Corbynite “left” during the pandemic is the Don’t Leave, Organise campaign, dedicated to urging workers and young people to stay in the Labour Party. To that aim, a curtain of silence has descended over the leaked internal report exposing a concerted campaign of senior officials in the party’s HQ to expel Labour members and MPs they considered too left-wing based on bogus accusations of anti-Semitism. After initially “demanding” an investigation, the SCG has left the matter entirely in the hands of the party’s National Executive Committee (NEC), whose “independent panel” is now preparing a whitewash.

In order to avoid any possible friction with Labour’s new leadership, the SCG statement is not signed by the five of its members currently serving in the shadow cabinet: Rebecca Long-Bailey, Dan Carden, Andy MacDonald, Marsha De Cordova and Imran Hussain.

Just as significant is the SCG’s attempts to boost the trade unions as vehicles through which to oppose Johnson’s “back-to-work” drive. In telling workers to “join a union” and promising those unions their “full and unwavering support,” the SCG is offering its seal of approval to the very organisations providing vital support to the Tory government.

With the unions’ full and active collaboration, key workers have been endangered in sector after sector and non-essential work has been allowed to continue. Now millions more are being sent back to their jobs with little or no safety provisions while the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and its affiliated unions place all responsibility for refusing to work in unsafe conditions on individual workers—who are told to trust their union to support them if they are victimised!

This will not wash. Workers and young people have

Corbyn’s number. His defeat in the 2019 general election was a reflection of popular disillusionment with his claim to have transformed the Labour Party—after years of preaching “unity” with the Blairites, “mediation” in industrial struggles, and conducting a Brexit policy “in the national interest.”

Half a decade of Corbyn’s leadership has produced a seamless transition to Starmer’s Labour Party: a party in which just 17 MPs (7 percent of the Parliamentary Labour Party) can summon the courage to add their name to a tweet belatedly discovering that the Tories are waging the class war!

Whatever phrases they might use, the dwindling rump of the “Labour Left” remains dedicated to the ultimate goal of protecting the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy—which stand on the other side of the barricades to the working class in the “class war” now cynically, indeed fearfully, invoked by the SCG.



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