

UK Labour Party wades deeper into the nationalist sewer

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On February 2, the *Guardian* published an exclusive report on a leaked internal strategy presentation for the Labour Party, which it summed up as a plan to “focus on flag and patriotism to win back voters.”

The strategy, including research on the “party’s brand by agency Republic dating from September”, was presented last month by Labour’s head of research. It found that “voters were confused about ‘what we stand for, and what our purpose is, but also who we represent’.”

Clarifying such confusion provides Labour with an excuse for a further lurch to the right, by following advice to make “use of the [union] flag, veterans [and] dressing smartly.”

The presentation, as heard and seen by the *Guardian*, begins with a few home truths before making clear just how low Labour intends to stoop to portray itself as the right-wing, anti-socialist, and nationalist party it is, while shedding any remaining and unwanted “left” baggage it was saddled with under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn.

The focus is on winning back “foundation seats”, a term referring to the “red wall” constituencies in the north of England, once viewed as safely Labour but lost to the Conservatives in the 2019 general election, as well as “other seats it fears could also turn blue.”

The slides presented featured comments from “extensive focus groups from Watford to Grimsby conducted in September alongside nationwide polling focus groups” including, “I don’t know anything about the Labour party at the moment, they have been way too quiet” and saying of new party leader Sir Keir Starmer, “he needs to stop sitting on the fence”.

The answer offered is to make “displays of patriotism... to reinforce that the party has changed.” The illustrative soundbites cited include:

* “Belonging needs to be reinforced through all messengers”.

* “communicating Labour’s respect and commitment for the country can represent a change in the party’s body language”.

* “The use of the flag, veterans, dressing smartly at the war memorial etc give voters a sense of authentic values alignment.”

The advice was taken up immediately. The *Guardian* reports, “In WhatsApp messages, sent within hours of one briefing, senior officials ordered: ‘Please prioritise the union jack header images, not the plain red ones.’ Earlier this week [January 27] Starmer presented a party-political broadcast beside a union flag and promising to ‘rebuild our country’. Red Wall voters have also been targeted with a Facebook advert, which demands the Tories get tougher on border control, something which Labour emphasised in an opposition day debate on Monday. ‘Britain is locked down. But the borders are open. Any idea why?’ the ad said...”

Labour right falsifies reasons for 2019 general election loss

This presentation of the reasons for Labour’s declining support is meant to reinforce the message of the Blairite right-wing of the party—that its

general election rout in 2019 was because Corbyn had taken the party too far to the left, a move that was only popular with students and the “metropolitan elite”. This was supposedly deeply alienating for Labour’s traditional working-class base in its former Northern heartlands—routinely portrayed as socially conservative, pro-Monarchy, patriotic, and fervently supportive of Brexit.

By promising to honour the 52 percent vote to leave the European Union (EU) in the 2016 referendum and “Get Brexit done”, the narrative insists, Boris Johnson demolished the Potemkin Village of Corbyn’s supposed popularity. It proved that the sharp rise in support for Labour in the previous 2017 general election was a fluke and confirming the Tories as the authentic “cultural voice” of the Northern working class.

The reference to “dressing smartly at the war memorial” pays homage to stings carried out by the Tory press against Corbyn for wearing a raincoat rather than an overcoat at the 2018 Cenotaph Remembrance Sunday commemoration, itself a rehash of a notorious 1981 attack on former Labour leader Michael Foot.

Based on this political caricature of the working class in the north, Labour’s right intends to press ahead with its pro-big business agenda—shorn of even the minimal social palliatives advanced by Corbyn that are anathema to the City of London and the financial oligarchy. According to the *Guardian*, the “research” reportedly also finds that “voters” believe Labour is the party of “spend, spend, spend”, which is blamed not only on Corbyn but “on the leadership of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. The result, according to the heading on one slide, is: ‘No part of the brand is insulated from lack of economic credibility.’”

To illustrate how Labour intends to use its newfound “concern” for the supposed views of the North’s workers, it is only necessary to cite Former Labour MP Jenny Chapman, chair of Starmer’s campaign to become party leader.

She declares of Corbyn, “He cleared the pitch. He walked away from the flag, he didn’t stand up for the national anthem, he didn’t dress appropriately for an important remembrance event. People care about these things and it is about respect—respect for them and respect for the country.”

Chapman, who lost her Darlington seat in 2019, asserts of canvassed voters, “They would be very blunt about it... They would call Jeremy a communist or a terrorist and it isn’t fair... And they would say he didn’t love this country. I am not saying it was true or fair, but that was the perception and it is one we need to correct.”

The claim that working class voters in the north are all anti-communist bigots who take their political line from *The Sun* newspaper is a lie. Support for Corbyn in 2017 was as widespread in the North as in the South, particularly among younger working-class voters, whether in the smaller towns and cities that voted substantially to leave the EU or in more major urban centres like Leeds, Newcastle, Manchester and Liverpool, which voted Remain. Starmer’s own inability to resuscitate the Labour Party, even as the Tories preside over more than 113,000

COVID-19 deaths, is proof that Labour's 2019 election defeat had nothing to do with Corbyn being "too far left".

WSWS analysis of Labour defeat

Analysing the 2019 result in an article, "UK general election result confirms protracted death of the Labour Party," the WSWS noted that Johnson was able to capture a swathe of traditional Labour seats in the north of England, the West Midlands and Wales—with a swing varying from two-points in seats with a Leave vote below 45 percent, to eight-points in seats where 60 percent plus voted Leave:

But it insisted, "The central fact, however, is that Labour haemorrhaged support across the UK and among all sections of workers, young and old, from the north and south, those in favour of leaving the European Union and for remaining..."

"This rout can only be understood as a negative verdict on Corbyn's declared project of pushing the Labour Party 'to the left' so that it could provide a political alternative to austerity, militarism and war. This revealed a deep alienation of the working class from Labour that has been decades in the making..."

"Corbyn promised an end to austerity, Thatcherite free-market nostrums and war crimes such as Iraq in 2003. The enthusiasm generated saw Labour claw back in the 2017 election some of the 5 million votes lost under Blair and Brown between 1997 and 2010. But this recovery has collapsed, amid growing disenchantment among those who backed Corbyn and abstention and a shift to other parties by workers who see no reason whatsoever to remain loyal to Labour."

Regarding a more specific breakdown of Labour's lost votes, the analysis continued, "Labour lost fully eight points nationally and over 10 percent in Leave areas. This means that one in four Labour Leavers, 700,000, switched to the Tories, but hundreds of thousands more did not vote at all... The most striking loss of all is the fall in Labour's share of the national youth vote by 10 percent, matching the losses suffered in northern constituencies... Datapix also stressed that Labour nationally lost 1.1 million votes to the Tories, but lost more still, 1.3 million, to the Lib Dems and Greens. Nearly half of Labour's seat losses can be attributed to losing Remain voters to other parties."

Why the exclusive focus on the collapse of the "Red Wall" seats, which is continued today in the campaign to prove Labour's patriotic bona fides?

The article explained, "The emphasis placed on these extraordinary shifts and the conclusions drawn in official circles are bound up with efforts to use Labour's collapse to steer British politics ever further to the right."

"The Tories coined the term 'Workington Man,' after the former mining town, to represent the older, Brexit supporting white voter from the north. The brainchild of the Onward thinktank, it is now commonly used to supposedly epitomise the working-class constituency lost by Labour because Corbyn was 'too left wing,' and did not oppose immigration and champion law and order with sufficient enthusiasm."

The WSWS insisted, "Corbyn's betrayal of the working class was not that he did not throw himself behind the right-wing, anti-immigrant and nationalist agenda of the Tory right and Nigel Farage on Brexit. It was that his shift was to the pro-EU Remain agenda of the dominant sections of big business. In doing so he also betrayed the majority of young people, often the most exploited 'precariat', and the many sections of workers who supported Remain because they were repelled by the narrow nationalism of Brexit."

"The only way Corbyn could have not betrayed the working class was to

oppose both reactionary factions of the ruling class and call for working class unity in struggle against big business in Britain and throughout the continent for a socialist Europe. This was something Corbyn could never do. It would have set him against the Blairite right in his own party and his political masters in the City of London."

Corbyn's refusal to drive out Labour's right-wing

It was Corbyn's refusal to fight to drive Labour's right-wing out of the party that temporarily gave political reaction its head. Without expelling the Blairites, all talk of Labour so much as lessening the devastating hardship imposed on the entire working class was hot air. And by 2019 ever larger sections of the working class had drawn this conclusion.

Brexit was only able to play its part in Labour's northern debacle because the Tories and Farage successfully blamed the EU and immigration for the social devastation produced by decades of privatisation, corporate tax cutting, de-industrialisation, de-skilling, the proliferation of low wage jobs, and the gutting of services—all presided over by Labour-controlled authorities and their trade union accomplices under Tory and Labour governments.

The exposure of Corbyn's pretensions to offer an alternative to this bitter legacy of betrayal was the same reason why Labour lost support in the south of England, especially in the major urban centres and among the younger voters that had backed him most enthusiastically. He and his backers in the Labour "left" and the pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party are politically responsible not only for Johnson's election but also for handing Labour back over to Starmer and his Blairite gang of political criminals. And it is the Tory party and the Blairite Labour Party who constitute the real right-wing threat, rather than sections of workers who presently hold a confused patriotic sentiment.

Elected Labour leader in September 2015 on a massive wave of popular demand for socialism, Corbyn's five years in office ended with Labour led by witch-hunters and flag-waving anti-communists. The dangerous implications for the future are clear. In a telling response to the policy proposals, an unnamed Labour Party "staffer" told the *Guardian*, "I was just sat there replaying in my mind the storming of the Capitol [in Washington last month] and thinking: are you really so blind to what happens when you start pandering to the language and concerns of the right?"

As has become the norm, no comment was made on the leaked proposals by Corbyn—for fear of identifying himself with even the vaguest oppositional sentiment and cutting across his campaign to win back the Labour whip. But none of his co-thinkers have fared better, instead echoing Corbyn's efforts in December 2019 to offer a left variant of patriotism, based on "supporting each other, not attacking somebody else" and "loving your country enough to make it a place where nobody is homeless or hungry, held back or left behind." This was the same perspective that led Corbyn into "national unity" discussions with both Johnson and his predecessor Theresa May during the protracted Brexit crisis and his spurned offer to the opposition parties and pro-EU Tories in October 2019, to lead a government of national unity to prevent a no-deal Brexit.

Clive Lewis, MP, said of the proposals, "It's not patriotism; it's Fatherland-ism," but proposed a more "complex" vision of "national identity and patriotism" to unite "Our party, our people and our country." Brighton Kemptown MP Lloyd Russell-Moyle opined, "There is nothing wrong with showing that you are comfortable with the symbols of your country. But if you do it by just waving the flag, our core supporters, who

are young, liberal, EU-supporting, will get confused about the message you are trying to send.”

Such invocations of a “progressive patriotism,” can be based on supposedly eternal “British values” of parliamentary democracy and the rule of law, or a love of various national institutions (always the National Health Service, sometimes, as in a recent *Guardian* opinion piece by Nesrine Malik, stretching to “an embattled judiciary that is challenging the government’s unlawful parliamentary suspensions” and a “civil service wrestling with Brexit”). They may also lay claim to an “English nationalism”, supposedly thereby cut free from the legacy of British imperialism. Collectively they represent a reactionary attempt to advance a vaguely “left” nationalism as a means of combating the growth of socialism and internationalism.

Like the promotion of Scottish and Welsh nationalism, all invocations of “patriotism” are used to divide the working class and tie workers and young people to one or another section of the bourgeoisie and its state apparatus. Such appeals, as is proved by Labour’s emphasis on “veterans” and military commemorations, always end up as support for war. The proliferation of such appeals to nationalism throughout the Labour Party confirms it as a political enemy of the working class and opponent of its struggle against Britain’s ruling elite, which continues its murderous refusal to fight the pandemic and destruction of the jobs, livelihoods and essential services on which millions depend.



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