

Tory victory in Hartlepool by-election signals death throes of UK Labour Party

Thomas Scripps
7 May 2021

The Labour Party suffered a rout in Thursday's Hartlepool by-election, giving the Conservative Party the seat for the first time in the constituency's 62-year history. Jill Mortimer, the Tory candidate, won 51.9 percent of the vote, versus Paul Williams's 28.7 percent for Labour—a massive 16 percent swing to the Tory Party compared to the last election in 2019.

It is only the second time in 40 years that the governing party has taken a seat from the opposition during a by-election.

Hartlepool is a deindustrialised port town in the northeast of England and produced one of the largest pro-Brexit votes (69.6 percent) in the 2016 referendum. In the 2019 general election, Nigel Farage's Brexit Party won 25.8 percent of the vote. The bulk of its share transferred to the Tory party on Thursday, leaving the new incarnation of the Brexit Party (Reform UK) with just over 1 percent.

While the Tories made gains, Labour lost 9 percent on their 2019 vote, with many former supporters staying at home or voting for other smaller parties. Independent candidate Sam Lee, who ran a localist campaign pitched to those dissatisfied with Labour and the Conservatives, won 9.7 percent.

The majority of the largely working-class electorate stayed home in disgust, with a turnout of just 42.7 percent.

The results confirm the Socialist Equality Party's analysis of the protracted death of the Labour Party, of Brexit, and the significance of the collapse of Corbynism.

Labour's election loss in 2019 was not the result of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's being "too left-wing", as the media, and the Labour Party itself, have insisted. The disaster produced in Hartlepool by current leader Sir Keir Starmer's right-wing pitch, and ruthless purge of any left-wing sentiment in the Labour membership, proves there is no popular demand

whatsoever for the party's Blairite politics.

In fact, Labour's share of the vote in Hartlepool has declined in almost every general election since 1997, in response to its transformation into a Tory Party mark two. After the 2015 election, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained: "Decades of political betrayals by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy in the UK, and social democracy and Stalinism internationally, have taken their toll. At every turn, they have blocked the class struggle while waging a relentless ideological offensive against any socialist political consciousness in the working class."

The one exception to Labour's declining vote in Hartlepool was Corbyn's first election in 2017, riding a wave of support from workers and youth who believed he would lead a fight against austerity and war.

But this political fraud had a short shelf life. Corbyn, continuing a lifetime of loyalty to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, dedicated himself to suppressing and sabotaging the popular movement to kick out the Blairite right-wing, preaching "party unity" even as they plotted continuously against him. He worked with the trade union leaders to suppress the class struggle, driving strike levels to record lows, and instructed Labour councillors to enforce austerity budgets.

The stymying of a left-wing development in the working class opened the door to the right, who advanced a nationalist "solution" to the social crisis confronting millions—epitomised by Brexit. The Leave campaign utilised legitimate hostility to the bosses' club of the European Union but channelled this in a reactionary direction—invoking nationalism, patriotism, anti-migrant prejudice, and a glorification of British sovereignty to draw together a coalition of those suffering severe financial hardship, the economically fragile middle class and the cloistered ranks of rural middle England.

The only progressive opposition to this noxious

campaign, particularly as far as combating the support it won among the generally older and more oppressed layers of workers, would have been a fight for the solidarity of the European and international working class based on a socialist programme. Instead Corbyn abandoned his lifelong opposition to the EU—one based on the claim that an “independent” Britain was a route to implementing a reformist programme—to urge support for a Remain vote in line with the demands of the dominant voices within the bourgeoisie and the labour bureaucracy.

After the vote, Corbyn balanced between supporting former Tory Prime Minister Theresa May’s efforts to secure a Brexit deal and facilitating his own party’s efforts to find a mechanism for overturning the result. The working class was kept excluded from the political scene in favour of his constant gyrations to defend “the national interest”.

Corbyn continued to capitulate before every assault launched against him by the Labour right. He not only retreated before the slanderous campaign accusing Labour of antisemitism but allowed his own supporters to be witch-hunted and expelled.

Thanks to Corbyn’s treachery, Labour haemorrhaged support across the country and across the Brexit divide, particularly among the young people attracted to Labour by his socialist pretensions. This handed Boris Johnson a staggering victory in the 2019 general election. The WWSW wrote in the aftermath, “The deep divisions over Brexit could only be fostered and then exploited by the Tories because Corbyn’s actions since taking office in 2015 have confirmed that Labour’s ‘left’ is just as hostile to the working class as the Blairite right.”

Corbyn and his allies completed their betrayal by meekly handing the party over to Starmer, under whose leadership Labour has provided vital political support to the Johnson government’s murderous “herd immunity” agenda in the name of “constructive opposition”.

Following a year in which more than 150,000 lives have been lost to the pandemic, Labour handed victory to the Tory mass murderers—who celebrated by dispatching both Johnson and a giant inflatable model of the man now described as the party’s “greatest asset”.

The Blairites’ explanation of their defeat is that poor Sir Keir has not had enough time to distance the party from the aberrant period of Corbyn’s leadership and must now escalate its turn rightwards. Tony Blair’s closest collaborator Peter Mandelson told BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme, “The last 11 general elections read: lose, lose, lose, lose, Blair, Blair, Blair, lose, lose, lose, lose.”

The only commentary more nauseating than this self-serving nonsense is the pathetic mewling of the Corbynites—begging Starmer to “change direction” and let them sit at the “top table”, in the words of Labour MPs Richard Burdon and Lloyd Russell-Moyle.

John McDonnell, Corbyn’s former shadow chancellor, summed up the Labour left’s grovelling subservience to its Blairite masters. He told *BBC News* Starmer should build a “broad church” cabinet “of the left, right and centre”. Speaking on *Today* he insisted, “Keir’s got to be given his chance and I’ve said that all the way along. I’m not going to be one of those people treating [him] the way they treated Jeremy [Corbyn]—always challenging him, coups and all the rest.”

Hartlepool underscores the political challenge facing workers in the UK and their class brothers and sisters across Europe. The social democratic parties everywhere have been transformed into nakedly pro-capitalist, right-wing parties of exploitation and war, indistinguishable from their nominal conservative opponents. The unions have degenerated into corporatist syndicates, dedicated to the suppression of the class struggle and clearing the way for the formation of ever more right-wing governments.

This process has been massively accelerated by the pandemic, which has seen the unions and official “left” and “centre” parties line up with a policy of social murder and corporate looting all over the world.

For the working class, the only way forward is through a struggle to build a genuinely socialist world party—representing the independent interests of the working class, ruthlessly hostile to the soporific politics of Corbyn and his international counterparts, and dedicated to the seizure of state power and expropriation of the corporate and financial oligarchy.

This programme is advanced solely by the International Committee of the Fourth International, whose British section, the Socialist Equality Party, must now be built by the most advanced sections of workers and youth.



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsw.org/contact