

Jeremy Corbyn and the collapse of Britain's Labour Party

Chris Marsden
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In the aftermath of Labour's May 6 "Super Thursday" electoral debacle, efforts are being made to rehabilitate Jeremy Corbyn as an alternative to the disastrous right-wing lurch of the party under Sir Keir Starmer.

Labour lost the Hartlepool by-election to the Conservatives and suffered its worst performance in local council elections since 1935, with Starmer held in popular contempt for his colluding with Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government during the pandemic—a policy he famously described as "constructive criticism". In response Corbyn, his former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, and others in his inner circle are portraying themselves as saviours who Starmer must now work with to get Labour back on track.

This is an extraordinary demonstration of political cynicism. The character of their appeal, for a deeper working relationship between "left" and "right", confirms that Corbyn and his allies are responsible for Starmer's rise to office and the consolidation of the right's control of the party.

McDonnell told LBC's Iain Dale on Tuesday that Corbyn, who was suspended from membership by Starmer based on bogus accusations of anti-Semitism, "still hasn't got the whip back and again I think that is a real mistake by Keir... He just needs the Chief Whip and the Leader to say come back. And Jeremy would be back like a shot..."

Corbyn wrote for the *Independent* this week, making clear that he is offering his services to Starmer. Citing various rhetorical commitments to a living wage, secure housing, transport, properly funded healthcare and education made in Labour's 2017 election manifesto, Corbyn proclaimed, "There is a consensus on these policies across the Labour Party; they are the programme Keir Starmer was elected on."

This is, of course, a lie. The Labour Party is committed to preserving the interests of British imperialism, nothing else. This is proved by its treatment of those workers and young people who joined from 2015 based on the mistaken belief that Corbyn would fight for socialist policies, as the "enemy within" to be witch-hunted and expelled.

Corbyn is still seeking to conceal the implacable hostility of the Labour Party and the trade unions to the social and political interests of the working class and to the socialist aspirations of its best elements. This operation, the essence of "Corbynism", is epitomised by his statement in the *Independent* that, "The challenge facing progressives across the western world is that support for redistributive policies is rising while support for social democratic parties is falling."

It is precisely because the working class is moving to the left while social democratic parties the world over are moving to the right that they are haemorrhaging support and facing collapse.

Corbyn's aim as Labour leader was to block the leftward movement of the working class and its younger generation and corral it behind the Labour Party. He spelled this out in 2015, immediately prior to being elected party leader, explaining that his aim was to prevent Labour's "Pasokification"—a reference to the implosion of PASOK and other social

democratic parties throughout Europe.

The process was already well advanced when Corbyn made his reluctant bid for leadership, so that various Stalinist and pseudo-left groups had begun to set up and champion new "broad left" parties such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain as an alternative to the discredited social democratic parties.

Faced with widespread hostility to the Blairite right-wing, Corbyn set out to rescue Labour. Under advisement from leading Stalinists and members of pseudo-left groups, he emphasised that the development of a new "broad left" in the UK must proceed through the Labour Party, not outside of it. "I have been in Greece, I have been in Spain," he said. "It's very interesting that social democratic parties that accept the austerity agenda and end up implementing it end up losing a lot of members and a lot of support. I think we have a chance to do something different here."

Corbyn's victory was hailed by the pseudo-left in Britain as proof that Labour and its affiliated trade unions could be pushed to the left—reinforcing his own insistence that everything must proceed within the political and organisational straitjacket imposed by the labour bureaucracy.

The Socialist Party defined the "Corbyn insurgency" as an attempt "to re-establish a new workers' party", emphasising Labour's connection with the trade unions as "the collective voice of millions of workers." The Socialist Workers Party called it proof of the "rebirth of social democracy... 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 politically animated such claims was opposition to the struggle to build a revolutionary leadership in the working class, by forces whose political origins are in the ranks of the Stalinist parties or as opponents of Trotskyism who had broken from the Fourth International decades previously. Corbyn's heading of the Labour Party was used as an argument for similar efforts to build "left populist" parties to fill the political void created by the collapse of social democracy. These were to be non-socialist, anti-working class parties, promising personal advancement for sections of the upper middle class by utilising various forms of identity politics, and based on a pro-capitalist programme opposed to the class struggle and socialist revolution.

Chantal Mouffe, the author of *For a Left Populism*, explained in April 2018, "The crisis of European social democracy has now been confirmed. After the failures of PASOK in Greece, Partij van de Arbeid in the Netherlands, PSOE in Spain, the SPÖ in Austria, the SPD in Germany and the Partie Socialiste in France, the PD in Italy have just received the worst election results in its party's history. The single exception to this disastrous vista across Europe is to be found in Great Britain, at the Labour Party, which under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn is rapidly growing in size and power." She stressed that "Corbyn's advantage, which he enjoys unlike his comrades in Podemos or La France Insoumise, is that he finds himself at the head of a large party, which has

overwhelming support from the unions.”

This was a key issue for the ideologues of the pseudo-left, particularly because Corbyn came to power as Syriza was betraying its popular mandate to oppose austerity measures demanded by the European Union and International Monetary Fund, leaving their former political darling, Alexis Tsipras, a despised figure in the working class in Greece and internationally.

Defining Corbyn’s political perspective, Mouffe told *Red Pepper* in September 2018, “The traditional left political frontier was established on the basis of class. There was the working class, or the proletariat, versus the bourgeoisie. Today, given the evolution of society, that is not the way in which one should establish the political frontier anymore.

“There are a series of democratic demands which cannot be formulated in terms of class—for example, it is necessary to take account of the demands of feminism, anti-racism, the gay movement, ecology. Those are demands that do not sit with the traditional opposition between working class and bourgeoisie. We need to build the frontier in a populist way, which is much more transversal, in terms of ‘the people’ against ‘the oligarchy’. There are many sectors that can be won for the anti-neoliberal project and it is necessary to federate them by constructing a ‘people’: a collective will.”

This was the agenda advanced by Corbyn, with his non-class invocation, “For the many, not the few.” It was a programme stressing unity within the Labour Party and, above all, efforts to stifle growing class antagonisms, rooted in ever worsening social inequality, through what he described as “a new kind of politics: kinder, more respectful, but courageous, too.”

In practice this meant the suppression of all efforts to kick out the Blairite right-wing, working with the trade union leaders to suppress strikes, and instructing Labour councillors to obey the law and impose Tory cuts. When it came to war, the former leader of the Stop the War Coalition allowed a free vote on bombing Syria, backed NATO membership and the recommissioning of the Trident nuclear weapons system.

Corbyn declares in his article for the *Independent*, “In 2017, Labour reversed a decade of political decline, including in the communities that had been torn apart by Margaret Thatcher’s war on organised workers and industry, increasing its vote share in places like Hartlepool and making gains from High Peak to Canterbury. My greatest regret is that by 2019 the Conservatives were able to undo many of those gains.”

He blames his and Labour’s decline on the Tories successfully exploiting the single issue of “delivering the Brexit vote”. But Corbyn’s 2017 gains were all made after the 2016 Brexit referendum, in both leave and remain constituencies. The difference was that by 2019, the working class had got Corbyn’s true measure, knew he would not fight for their social interests, saw him offer national unity agreements with Theresa May and then Boris Johnson to “get Brexit done,” and had concluded that he was a servile creature of the Blairite right who were busy witch-hunting his supporters out of the Labour Party.

It was Corbyn who put Johnson in office and then meekly handed the party over to the Blairites, under the leadership of Starmer. This left the working class with no real choice in the last elections and most stayed at home in disgust. The bitter price paid for his five years in office are the 150,000 victims of Johnson’s “herd immunity” policies, and a Tory government readying a further savage assault on the livelihoods and democratic rights of the working class.

The same dilemma holds true of workers in every European country. The social democratic parties, long ago transformed into nakedly pro-capitalist, right-wing parties of exploitation and war, are in a state of putrefaction. In France, the Parti Socialiste has virtually collapsed, with around 6 percent of the popular vote—around the same or less than PASOK. In Germany, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) has lost four

consecutive federal elections, secured just 20.5 percent in the 2019 Federal elections, and less than 16 percent in the 2019 European elections. Its role in the Grand Coalition government virtually guarantees continued losses.

The pseudo-left/Stalinist created parties are also ever more discredited. Immediately prior to “Super Thursday” elections in the UK, the right-wing Popular Party (PP) defeated the ruling Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and pseudo-left coalition partner Podemos in the May 4 Madrid regional election. Podemos, represented by party leader Pablo Iglesias, crashed to last place with just 7.2 percent of the vote, with Iglesias resigning.

Real dangers are posed to the working class by the terminal degeneration of the old parties and the reactionary role of their pseudo-left allies and defenders.

In the UK, it has left the Tories in office for 11 years of savage austerity, unprecedented attacks on democratic rights, escalating warmongering targeting Russia and China, and the deadly cost of a pandemic that Johnson “let rip” and “let the bodies pile high”.

In Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany is the main opposition party, even as its policies of militarism and anti-migrant xenophobia are embraced by the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union and SPD Grand Coalition.

In Madrid, the PP, the heirs of Franco, and the fascist Vox party rule Spain’s capital—after waging an anti-communist campaign deliberately invoking the Civil War and promising an end to all even vestigial protections against Covid. The election saw fascist death threats directed towards Iglesias and others, just weeks after WhatsApp comments were leaked from retired generals and colonels proclaiming loyalty to fascism, boasting of links to active-duty officers and to Vox, and calling for a coup to murder “26 million” left-wing Spaniards.

France also has been rocked by the release of two letters, one from retired generals, many connected to Marine Le Pen’s National Rally, and another from a group of serving French soldiers, threatening civil war.

Millions of workers have already rejected their old leaderships, but this must now become a conscious political break with the express aim of constructing a new and genuinely socialist leadership.

The rightward lurch of Labour and other social democratic parties, together with the transformation of the trade unions into adjuncts of corporate management and the state, is not merely due to bad leaders who can be replaced by better ones advocating left reformist policies. The globalisation of production and the integration of the world market has rendered bankrupt policies based on securing reforms without challenging capitalism and the repressive apparatus of the nation state. The old nationally-based labour bureaucracies and parties everywhere have responded in accordance with their history, pro-capitalist programmes and privileged class interests —by repudiating reformism and openly embracing their role as guardians of the bourgeois order.

The working class must now undertake to build a party whose programme corresponds to the realities of globally organised capitalist exploitation and the irreconcilable conflict between the capitalist class in every country and the international working class—the Socialist Equality Party in Britain and its sister parties within the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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