

UK Batley and Spen by-election is a carnival of reaction

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Today's by-election in Batley and Spen has caused panic in the Labour Party over what a potential defeat could mean for its leader Sir Keir Starmer.

It was in the West Yorkshire constituency that local MP Jo Cox was brutally murdered in June 2016, just before the referendum on British membership of the European Union. Her killer, neo-Nazi Thomas Mair, shouted, "Britain First" as he shot and stabbed the Labour MP—a Remain supporter.

The resulting by-election in October that year saw all the major parties agree to let Labour's Tracy Brabin run practically uncontested. This show of unity was to conceal that the referendum had been a means for diverting social tensions, especially following the 2008 financial crash, behind two equally right-wing factions of the ruling elite that had bailed-out the super-rich while imposing austerity against the working class.

Five years on, official politics has become even more putrid as the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the gulf between working people and the official parties. More than 150,000 people in the UK have died because of the government's "herd immunity" policies. The bailout of the financial oligarchy this time round has far surpassed that of 2008, while workers have been forced back into unsafe workplaces, and their wages and conditions smashed.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government is hated by millions for its criminal indifference to public health and the "pandemic profiteering" it has encouraged, and benefited from, at the cost of workers' lives. On June 17, a by-election in Chesham and Amersham saw a Tory 15,000-plus majority overturned on a 20 percent swing to the Liberal Democrats. The Batley and Spen by-election also takes place less than a week after Health Secretary Matt Hancock was forced to resign amid evidence of corruption and cronyism.

However, Labour is equally loathed. In May's by-election in the north east of England constituency of Hartlepool, it lost thousands of votes, enabling the Tories to take the seat for the first time. In Chesham and Amersham, Labour recorded its worst ever by-election result, and was pushed

into fourth place, losing its deposit.

Despite the party selecting Jo Cox's sister Kim Leadbeater to contest Batley, her plea for "consensus" politics appears to have failed to revive Labour's fortunes, with some forecasting its third electoral drubbing in a row.

Deservedly so. Starmer owes his position to a filthy, McCarthyite campaign by Labour's Blairites to oust Jeremy Corbyn as leader on bogus allegations of anti-Semitism. Their task was made easier by Corbyn's refusal to mount a struggle to drive the right-wing out of the party.

Starmer took over leadership at the start of the pandemic in April 2020. His pledge for "constructive opposition" to the Tories has seen Labour in a de facto coalition with the government. It has supported the policy of herd immunity, especially the reopening of schools to force parents into unsafe workplaces. Together with the unions, it has enabled a round of "fire and rehire" attacks through its corporatist relations with government and management.

The political problem in Batley, as everywhere, is that there is no candidate fighting for the independent class interests of workers against all the parties of big business.

As in Hartlepool, Batley is an area of social deprivation, with more than 40 percent of the population dependent on Universal Credit. Yet out of the 16 candidates contesting the by-election, almost half are avowedly right-wing. This includes Jayda Fransen, the former leader of Britain First—the slogan shouted by Mair as he killed Cox—who is running as an Independent, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the For Britain Movement.

In a constituency with a 20 percent Muslim population, these organisations are whipping up racism and Islamophobia. They assert that the main issue in the election is the events at Batley Grammar school in April, where a teacher was suspended for showing a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed in a lesson on blasphemy. Although the teacher was exonerated of ill-intent, he remains in hiding.

Despite not contesting the election, actor turned right-wing political provocateur Laurence Fox, for the Reclaim Party, held a rally of several hundred claiming the central issue was

one of “free speech” against “woke politics”. Fransen, who has been jailed for religiously aggravated crimes, styles herself as representing “the forgotten people of British [sic]. Christian, Batley and Spen! For God and Britannia!”

Right-wing elements are thought to be behind the circulation of fake Labour Party leaflets showing Starmer taking the knee to Black Lives Matter and purportedly stating, “whiteness” is the “biggest threat to our precious multicultural society”.

Labour has also been condemned by Muslim organisations in the area for ignoring Islamophobia, and for Starmer’s refusal to condemn Israel’s recent bombing of Gaza. An open letter to Labour from five Muslim groups warned Starmer that, “after decades of supporting this party, knocking on doors, organising voter turnout drives and so much more, we are now in serious doubt over whether we can continue with our support.”

A column in the *Mail on Sunday* cited an anonymous Labour official said the party was “haemorrhaging votes among Muslim voters” because of a backlash against Starmer’s “challenge” to anti-Semitism. Muslim Council of Britain spokesman Miqdaad Versi described the comment as a “false racist stereotype”.

Significantly, Labour and the media have little to say on right-wing political activity in an area where one of the party’s own sitting MPs was murdered by a white supremacist. Their indignation is directly almost entirely against the candidacy of George Galloway and his recently founded Workers Party of Britain, who is presenting himself as the anti-Starmer candidate. With posters proclaiming “Starmer Out”, Galloway argues that “if, for whatever reason, you think that the current leader of the Labour party needs to be replaced, I’m your man.”

Galloway is an inveterate political opportunist and a life-long admirer of Joseph Stalin and the counter-revolutionary perspective of “socialism in one country”. He combines anti-war rhetoric with support for British nationalism, which he presents as part of “traditional” working class values. In the Brexit referendum, he allied with the right-wing former stockbroker and UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, with the rallying cry “Left, right, left, right, forward march together.” In Batley and Spen, he espouses supposedly “Muslim” issues—Palestine, Islamophobia—while solidarising with Fox against “cancel culture”, reportedly telling the “free speech” rally that he did not want his children to be “taught how to masturbate in school” and that there were “99 genders”.

Labour has blamed supporters of Galloway for an attack on their campaign team that saw one person physically assaulted, with shadow minister Holly Lynch saying he had “created a toxic environment that is suffocating democracy and drowning out the voices of local people”. Galloway

denies any involvement by his campaign. He was, however, forced to distance himself from a supporter that described the holocaust as a “hoax” in a 2019 social media post.

In truth, Galloway’s campaign is only a variant on the reactionary and divisive “identity politics” promoted by all the parties. Labour stands accused of “dog-whistle racism” by one of its own MPs, Navendu Mishra, for circulating what he described as an anti-Hindu leaflet. Showing Johnson with India’s Hindu supremacist Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the message reads, “Don’t risk a Tory MP who is not on your side”: This after Starmer has allied Labour with Modi’s unilateral revoking of Kashmir’s autonomy in 2019 and has reached out to the Hindu Forum of Britain, which is closely aligned with the Indian Prime Minister’s anti-Muslim Bharatiya Janatha Party.

At any rate, Galloway’s intervention is aimed at politically rescuing the crisis-ridden Labour Party, with his message that a vote for him will force a leadership challenge and a change in its course.

Whatever the outcome of the Batley and Spen by-election, the campaign has revealed that the deep alienation of the working class from the Labour Party does not solve its political tasks—it raises them to a higher level. The carnival of reaction which has been unleashed on the constituency identifies every hostile and bankrupt political force workers confront and points to the necessity to build an opposed socialist, internationalist leadership.

As the Socialist Equality Party explained on the shipwreck of the Corbyn project, political tendencies and figures like Corbyn, “must be judged not on stated intentions, but on the essential criterion of the class interests served by the party and the programme he defends. Labour is a right-wing bourgeois party. It is complicit in all the crimes of British imperialism and has functioned as the principal political opponent of socialism for more than a century ... ”

The essential political task today is the building of the revolutionary party—the Socialist Equality Party, British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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