

Ken Loach expelled from the British Labour Party: The political lessons

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Filmmaker Ken Loach has been expelled from the Labour Party. He tweeted on Saturday:

“Labour HQ finally decided I’m not fit to be a member of their party, as I will not disown those already expelled. Well ... I am proud to stand with the good friends and comrades victimised by the purge. There is indeed a witch-hunt ... [Labour leader Sir Keir] Starmer and his clique will never lead a party of the people. We are many, they are few. Solidarity.”

Loach’s expulsion is the culmination of a filthy political campaign. The immediate pretext was his support for four groups proscribed from the Labour Party last month—Resist, Socialist Appeal, Labour in Exile and Labour Against the Witch-Hunt—on grounds of entryism and alleged anti-Semitism. But his card has been marked for some time in a campaign led by the Blairite right of the party and Zionist groups.

In 2018, Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel smeared Loach as an anti-Semite after the Free University of Brussels decided to award him an honorary doctorate. Moshe Kantor, President of the European Jewish Congress, condemned the decision as “an endorsement of someone who has played fast and loose with the historical record to the point of trivialising the Holocaust.”

These vile slanders were based on an effort the previous year, led by the *Guardian*, to manipulate quotations from an interview Loach gave on the 2017 Labour Party conference to suggest he approved of Holocaust denial.

This February, the Oxford University Jewish Society and the Board of Deputies of British Jews led a campaign to bar Loach from speaking at the university, which saw him accused of a “history of blatant anti-Semitism”. These despicable accusations centred on Loach’s involvement with Jim Allen’s play *Perdition* in 1987, on Zionists’ collusion with the Nazis in Hungary.

Loach made himself a target by speaking out against the witch-hunt of Labour members opposed to Zionism and critical of the state of Israel. His comment to the BBC in reference to the Labour Party conference in 2017 was, “All history is our common heritage to discuss and analyse. The founding of the State of Israel, for example, based on ethnic cleansing, is there for us to discuss... So don’t try to subvert that by false stories of anti-Semitism.”

After *Panorama* released its hatchet job documentary, “Is Labour Anti-Semitic?” in 2019, Loach commented, “That was probably the most disgusting programme I’ve ever seen on the BBC. Disgusting because it raised the horror of racism against Jews in the most atrocious propagandistic way, with crude journalism ... and it bought the propaganda from people who were intent on destroying [now former Labour leader Jeremy] Corbyn.”

Loach’s popularity, based on a record of serious artistic concern for the fate of working people over more than six decades, shielded him from the consequences of these statements for a time. But as a high-profile representative of Labour’s long abandoned reformist ideology, and of support for the Palestinians, his eventual fate was sealed.

The response of the Labour “left”

What is more remarkable than Loach’s expulsion by the right is the feeble response of the Labour “left”—something Starmer evidently counted on in expelling so well-liked a figure. Its members were able to summon little more than stern words in pro-forma tweets before moving on to next business. The Socialist Campaign Group of Labour MPs used it as another opportunity to appeal to Labour members to “stay in the party” and help it return to “socialist and international principles”.

Corbyn’s own tweet merely expressed sympathy for Loach who “has made outstanding films from *Cathy Come Home* to *I Daniel Blake*, directed brilliant broadcasts for Labour, and has always stood with the oppressed. He deserves our respect and solidarity.”

In other words, “Farewell Ken, good luck in your life outside Labour.”

Nothing more could be expected. Corbyn has either allowed or directly participated in the expulsion of Labour members on trumped-up anti-Semitism charges, including some of his closest and most prominent supporters, beginning with Ken Livingstone. The fact that Corbyn himself has had the party whip removed, on the basis of claims that he minimised the extent of anti-Semitism, changes nothing. Corbyn is engaged in an unprincipled legal battle to try and win back his right to sit as a Labour MP. He will not allow a trifle such as Loach’s expulsion to queer his pitch to the party’s leadership that he can be trusted to do whatever is demanded of him.

Responses to Corbyn’s tweet break down into three categories.

Right-wingers have taken advantage of his refusal to oppose, or even reference, the anti-Semitism witch-hunt to post in the theme of “it’s his [Loach’s] willingness to excuse racism that’s the issue, not his film making.”

Another group sharply questioned what exactly Corbyn was proposing to do about the attack, with one asking, “Why are you clinging to a pro austerity, pro ruling class Labour Party?”

The final set of responses urge Corbyn, “Time for you and Ken to launch a new Party.”

But Corbyn and Loach are at the end, not the start, of their political journeys.

Corbyn, who is the younger of the pair at 72 years of age, has never given the slightest indication of breaking with the Labour Party. His energies since being ousted as Labour leader have been directed toward promoting his Peace and Justice Project talking shop.

Loach, 85 years old, has been involved with multiple new “left” parties in the last twenty years, all of which have been defined by their orientation to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and all of which have come to nothing.

A new left party: Respect-Unity

The first of these was the Respect-Unity coalition, which he stood for in the 2004 elections to the European Parliament and whose national council he sat on.

Respect was established by the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as a “broad coalition”, which they hoped would consolidate the alliance of anti-war Labour MPs, trade union bureaucrats, Stalinists, Greens, Liberal Democrats and Muslim groups that came together in the Stop the War Coalition in opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The SWP sought above all to create a vehicle for “left” Labour MPs and trade union bureaucrats it anticipated would break from Labour in opposition to Tony Blair. This would allow them to maintain their restraining influence over the working class by advocating a few minimal reforms, hopefully in conjunction with a few like-minded trade union bureaucrats, with the SWP given choice roles as advisors.

Inveterate political opportunist George Galloway, the sole Labour MP the party felt required to expel for his vocal opposition to the Iraq War, was chosen to head the party and led it into ever more open and degrading alliances with the Muslim petty bourgeoisie. However, no other MP ever left Labour’s ranks, with Corbyn continuing his tame protests on the backbenches.

Analysing Respect in 2004, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) wrote on the World Socialist Web Site, “An appraisal of its origins and programme shows that Respect has been established in order to prevent a genuine political break with Labourism. It is based on the explicit rejection of any possibility of constructing a socialist party based on the working class...”

“The only pretence of socialism constituting a component of its programme is Respect’s call for a handful of social reforms to be enacted—ones it judges that will appeal to the working class without alienating other elements within its desired constituency, including disillusioned Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Muslim clerics.”

Respect split in 2007 between a wing led by Galloway and another by the SWP. The SEP wrote, “While both sides seek to blame the other for the break-up, the split is the shipwreck of a shared political project that was based on the most pragmatic and opportunist considerations.” The hoped-for breakaway of Labour “lefts” never materialised, leaving only Galloway, whose politics the SWP excused one day and found intolerable the next.

Galloway’s wing, with which Loach identified, came under the tutelage of Socialist Resistance leader Alan Thornett, who wrote in *International Viewpoint* in 2008 that the failure of Respect was due to “the models of political organisation and habits of engagement with the rest of the left adopted by some self-proclaimed Trotskyist organisations”.

By this Thornett meant that even the SWP was not opportunist enough to secure the backing of a supposed “left” faction of Labour and the trade unions. The task of “left” groups was to not let “formal programmatic agreement” get in the way of “the realities of organisation and class struggle on the ground”—that is, total political submission to the pro-capitalist Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

The SEP described Thornett’s missive as “one of the most unalloyed presentations of the cynical, unprincipled and anti-socialist politics behind all such efforts to construct new parties from the decaying fragments and breakaways from the old social democratic and Stalinist organisations.”

A new left party: Left Unity

Both wings of Respect faded into obscurity, but Thornett’s rotten words

were heeded. After backing the Socialist Party/Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union’s Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) in the 2012 London Mayoral elections, Loach, an ally of Thornett’s since he broke with Trotskyism in 1975, acted on his advice to establish a new party, Left Unity, in 2013 with the aim of “unit[ing] the diverse strands of radical and socialist politics in the UK”.

Left Unity advanced the tamest of reformist programmes, dismissing all talk of revolutionary politics and principle as “ideological lumber”.

The SEP characterised Left Unity as “a political manoeuvre led by Alan Thornett’s Socialist Resistance group, the British section of the Pabloite United Secretariat of the Fourth International. It is seeking to emulate what it calls ‘broad left’ party initiatives in other countries, particularly the Left Party of Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, Syriza in Greece, and Die Linke in Germany.

“All three of these are led by factions of the old Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies, advancing a minimal programme of reforms as a means of blocking a more fundamental shift to the left by the millions of workers who have grown to hate and despise their parent bodies. All are staffed by a middle-class layer of careerists, who have operated for years on the periphery of the old parties and in the trade unions and who now offer their services as propagandists of new bureaucratic and anti-socialist formations.”

What once again lent Left Unity its particularly sorrowful existence was the lack of any Labour “lefts” prepared to leave their comfortable existence to join this new venture. It took on the character of a jilted party-to-be, touting “the spirit of ‘45” in reference to Clement Atlee’s post-war Labour government while the real, existing Labour Party continued on its Blairite course.

Left Unity’s political orientation was summed up in its response to Corbyn’s surprise election as Labour leader. Several hundred members, including many of its most prominent, Loach among them, immediately abandoned their creation to join the Labour Party. This was, *Socialist Resistance* wrote, “not a break with the idea, which we have long defended, of building radical left parties to the left of social democracy across Europe; rather it is the continuation of such a policy by a different route.”

With Loach’s expulsion, this “idea” has come to its inevitable conclusion. The reign of the Labour “left” under Corbyn was defined by continual capitulation before the right, the sabotage of any efforts to throw out the Blairites, the abandonment of the fight against austerity and war, the demobilisation of the working class, and acquiescence before a witch-hunt seeking to brand all opposition to Zionism as anti-Semitism. Loach is only the latest person to discover that, for Corbyn, no sacrifice is too great to preserve Labour Party unity.

The way forward

Outside of the struggle for socialist principles, an orientation to the working class and a revolutionary perspective, calls for a new party are nothing but a call for a rebranded version of the same rotten politics that have led the working class to disaster.

In their article on Loach’s expulsion, the SWP writes that “staying inside the Labour Party ultimately means refusing to break free of the -constraints imposed by the right... That constant bind with the right makes Labour a dead end for the left. Loach himself knew this when he spent decades trying to build an alternative.”

But the SWP’s answer is for another failed “alternative” of building a smaller still nominally reformist vehicle dominated by the most pernicious anti-working class, anti-socialist force on which the entire Labour and

trade union bureaucracy has relied for decades to preserve its domination—the spineless political cowards of the Corbynite “left”. The real lesson of the failure of Corbynism and of Loach’s expulsion is the absolute necessity of building an independent Marxist party of the working class, to which the SWP and similar formations, rooted in the labour bureaucracy and articulating the interests of privileged sections of the middle class, is deeply hostile.

Workers around the world are entering into struggle. At every stage and in every country, they find themselves in conflict with the nationalist, pro-capitalist trade unions and international equivalents of the Labour Party. For the working class to carry forward its struggle requires a decisive break with these forces, developing a new political leadership which seeks to unite the international working class in an independent party on a revolutionary socialist programme.

The SEP’s orientation is to the working class, not to the bureaucracy that acts as a political and industrial police force for big business. We call for the incipient rebellion against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to be given organisational and political expression, through the formation of rank-and-file committees and by the advanced workers and youth joining and building our party and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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