

# Labour leader Keir Starmer grovels to Confederation of British Industry, while Corbyn's allies beg for party unity

Robert Stevens

23 November 2021

Addressing Monday's annual conference of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer told delegates, "As I said in my speech at Labour Party conference: Labour is back in business."

Labour, he added without intended irony, was "the party of working people. And that means Labour is also the party of business."

Starmer cited the first annual report of the CBI, published in 1965, with Labour's Harold Wilson then in office, declaring his solidarity with its declaration that "The whole future of Britain... rests upon the success of industry" and "industry must be dynamic, competitive and profitable to compete in an ever increasingly competitive world."

"In a way we have always been bound together, the Labour party and the CBI," said Starmer. "Britain is not as dynamic, competitive and profitable as we need to be," he added. "Today I want to discuss how we can create a contract together to put that right."

Starmer spoke before the CBI just a few hours after Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whose performance was a disaster. Johnson mixed up his notes, apologised repeatedly, and delivered trite homilies about the global success of Peppa Pig to a squirming audience. And he did so after a series of political embarrassments and a backbench rebellion on Monday that have prompted discussions over his future as party leader.

Starmer offered the CBI an alternative and safer pair of hands. Referring to Johnson's 2016 statement, "F\*\*k business"—made in his capacity as leader of the pro-Brexit Vote Leave campaign, dismissing fears of the economic consequences of leaving the European Union—Starmer told the CBI, "I can promise you that

the only F words I will be using are foreign investment, fair trade, fiscal policy and fiduciary duty."

Starmer's address was trailed for days as the final exorcism of Jeremy Corbyn's tenure as Labour leader. He did what had been promised.

A Labour government would rein in public spending because, "After COVID and Brexit, our public finances are in a fragile state. In her recent conference speech Rachel Reeves, my brilliant shadow chancellor, made her commitment to fiscal discipline abundantly clear... Our five fiscal rules make it plain that we will never spend money just for the sake of it. We really don't think that the solution to every problem is to throw cash at it."

He concluded with a proposal for nationalist criteria to determine government spending, in which "Our buy, make and sell more in Britain policy will weigh not just the cost and quality of a contract but also the value it brings to our communities. Make it here—that is how we will remake Britain."

For this, "What we need now is a sector-by-sector plan. For the car industry. For the steel industry. For all industry. Our competitors are already doing it. We can't afford not to. This is our side of the contract. To run a stable government and a tight ship."

*The Times* was effusive in praise of Starmer's speech, while referring to Johnson's as a "pig's ear". But he still had "to prove" that he "means what he says", commented Tom Harris, a former Labour MP turned Tory Brexiteer, in his *Telegraph* column. To do so, "Labour needs to become known as the mean party, the reluctant party, the party that will almost (almost) always say 'no' and will make you jump through hoops if you want to establish the case for funding."

As far as Starmer is concerned, his watchword is, “Ask and you shall receive.” For the last 18 months since taking over from the nominally left Corbyn, Labour under Starmer and the trade unions have functioned in a de facto coalition with the Johnson government as it imposed a herd immunity policy resulting in the deaths of over 160,000 people. He even trailed his CBI speech by refusing to answer, when questioned five times last Friday by a BBC journalist, if Corbyn would have been a “better Prime Minister” than Johnson.

Days earlier, Starmer was answering the howls of the right-wing media for a clampdown on migration via the English Channel by accusing Home Secretary Priti Patel of delivering “absolutely nothing and not securing “strong enough agreements with France” to do “the work upstream.”

No-one who is aware of Starmer’s Blairite background will be remotely taken aback by his latest paeans to the CBI. Moreover, his depiction of Labour’s historical relationship to big business is correct. The party has served the British ruling class faithfully for decades.

But that begs the question of why he can make this relationship so explicit when, less than two years ago, the party was led by someone who promised to make Labour an instrument for defending working people and implementing progressive reforms.

Starmer only took over as party leader in April 2020, but from the moment he did it was like Corbyn had never been its leader, let alone one elected on a massive popular mandate in 2015 to kick out the Blairites and take the fight to the Tories.

Instead, for the entire five years he was in office, Corbyn insisted that maintaining unity with the right would guide his every move. And by the end of his tenure, aside from a few minimal reformist policy pledges in a largely forgotten 2019 election manifesto, Corbyn handed the party untouched back to the Blairites with what passes for its left in disarray. Many, including Corbyn, were even facing expulsion from the party on bogus anti-Semitism charges, either as individual members or for supporting newly proscribed groups.

In this light, how did Corbyn and his allies respond to Starmer’s grovelling before big business?

November 18 marked one year since Starmer

removed the whip from Corbyn, meaning he is no longer recognised as a Labour MP and a member of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), on the bogus grounds that he facilitated anti-Semitism as Labour leader.

Corbyn marked the anniversary of his expulsion with a column on the *i* news website making another pathetic plea for unity with his persecutors. He could not even bring himself to mention Starmer’s name while declaring that “Moving forward, party democracy and our party’s nature as a broad church can be a vital step towards Labour inspiring hope and mobilising people to win a better future of improved living standards, opportunity and social justice.”

The Socialist Campaign Group (SCG), a rump of 36 MPs, the bulk of whom formed Corbyn’s shadow cabinet, marked the anniversary with a tweet calling on the Parliamentary Labour Party whip to be restored. Among the leading figures in the SCG is Corbyn’s former shadow chancellor John McDonnell, who described Starmer as a “proud socialist,” who represented “21st-century socialism” less than three months before Starmer expelled Corbyn from the PLP.

Why are Corbyn and company so desperate to keep a toehold in a party that is intent of witch-hunting them, to the extent that they will not even fight this witch-hunt? Their masochism is a manifestation of their essential political function as apologists and defenders of a pro-capitalist bureaucratic apparatus and determined opponents of the class struggle and socialism.

To oppose the Blairites, without which talk of opposing the Tories and forming a “left” Labour government was always a lie, would mean the independent political mobilisation of the working class against the entire parliamentary set up—one in which genuine distinctions between the rival parties of the bourgeoisie are an illusion. Corbyn et al are not the representative of left and socialist sentiment in the working class. They are the political police force tasked with suppressing such sentiment.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**