

UK Labour Party expels Audrey White after confrontation with Sir Keir Starmer

Laura Tiernan
3 August 2022

The Labour Party's National Executive Committee (NEC) has expelled 71-year-old Audrey White after she confronted Sir Keir Starmer in Liverpool, denouncing his right-wing policies and ongoing purge of left-wing members.

White, who is secretary of the Merseyside Pensioners Association, confronted Starmer in a local cafe last Monday. Her censure of Starmer, captured by filmmakers Hazuan Hashim and Phil Maxwell, has been viewed online millions of times.

"I don't know how you've got the guts to come to this city," White began, attacking Starmer's provocative decision to write an op-ed for *The Sun* newspaper. Rupert Murdoch's tabloid is the subject of a boycott by workers in the city over its savage vilification and slander of Liverpool football fans scapegoated for the 1989 Hillsborough stadium massacre that claimed 97 lives.

White continued, "You've expelled and witch-hunted [party members] in the most vicious way I've ever seen in my lifetime, and I've been a member of the Labour Party for a long, long time."

She stated, "all you've done is feed into the Tory ideology of not supporting strikes, of carrying on with the privatisation of our health service. You're doing everything to feed into a Tory victory. We may as well have a Tory if we have a person like you."

Starmer's response came just four days later. A letter from the NEC dated July 29 informed White she was expelled forthwith from the party.

The NEC stated that White had been expelled for an interview she gave to Socialist Appeal, concluding "that Mrs White had, in its opinion, demonstrated the type of support for Socialist Appeal prohibited by Chapter 2, Clause 1.5 B.v of the Labour Party rule book."

The NEC claimed it had expelled White in February, but that due to an "administrative error" she had not been informed. In fact, the party had continued deducting membership dues from White's bank account.

On Twitter, White described the NEC's letter as "Shameless & vindictive. A party rotten to the core, that can't tolerate being held to account by a 71-year-old. Even Stalin might've blushed." She told *Liverpool World* her encounter with Starmer "was planned at the last minute, but I'm pleased I've done it because it has resonated with millions of people across the country and it's been great."

Political affiliations

White's attack on Starmer won support in large part because it stood out amid the universal prostration of Labour's dwindling "left" rump that has long since made its peace with the Blairite right. She is one of the surviving remnants of a slew of supporters of various pseudo-left organisations that portrayed Jeremy Corbyn's 2015 leadership victory as the beginning of the socialist transformation of the Labour Party.

A well-known figure in Labour circles, White was nominated by Trades Union Congress General Secretary Frances O'Grady as one of the 100 most influential women in Britain. She was a prominent supporter of the Militant Tendency, Socialist Appeal's predecessor, during the 1980s. In 1983, she led a landmark industrial campaign against workplace sexual harassment that was later made into a film, *Business As Usual*, starring Glenda Jackson.

Socialist Appeal is one of several organisations which worked within the Labour Party to build support for the Corbyn project. In 2015, it portrayed Corbyn, a loyal Labour backbencher, as a de facto revolutionary socialist, declaring, "The old 'Mole of Revolution,' which Karl Marx talked about, had been burrowing away but has now burst through to the surface." It asserted his leadership was "the first step" in the socialist transformation of the Labour Party that would "dump the capitalist system where it belongs—in the dustbin of history."

By April 2020, the entire perspective of Socialist Appeal and similar petty-bourgeois groups lay in tatters. Corbyn's leadership of the party ended in a rout by Labour's right-wing. The self-serving explanation offered by Corbyn's backers is that his leadership was torpedoed by a state operation spearheaded by the Blairites. But why were their anti-democratic methods victorious, especially as Corbyn commanded the support of millions of workers and young people?

It was Corbyn who delivered the Blairites' victory. He opposed any struggle to drive the right-wing out of the party. He systematically demobilised hundreds of thousands of workers and young people who joined Labour to defeat the Blairites' policies of austerity, militarism and war. Corbyn capitulated to the right-wing on all points, retaining Labour's support for NATO and Trident nuclear weapons, allowing a free vote on the bombing of Syria and insisting that Labour-run councils enforce Tory government cuts.

Despite open state provocations, including threats by unnamed British generals to mount a coup if he became prime minister, Corbyn implored his supporters to turn the other cheek. He blocked demands from the membership for mandatory reselection of Labour MPs, insisting that Labour was a "broad church" in which all views must be respected.

As thousands of his supporters were framed-up and purged via manufactured claims of "left-wing anti-Semitism," Corbyn cooperated fully with the party's compliance unit. Even after his closest supporters, including Ken Livingstone and Chris Williamson, were expelled on bogus anti-Semitism charges, Corbyn remained silent.

Since Corbyn handed the leadership to Starmer—whom he twice promoted to the shadow cabinet—more than 150,000 people have quit the party.

White is a victim of Labour's final mopping-up operation as it moves to purge the last remnants of left-wing thought from the party. She defeated an earlier attempt by the *Jewish Chronicle* to smear her as an anti-Semite (a prelude to expulsion) in 2019. The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) found the newspaper's allegations were

“significantly misleading” and the *Chronicle* paid White substantial damages in an out-of-court settlement.

But inside the Labour Party, the NEC operates with impunity. A report submitted by Jewish Voice for Labour to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission last year stated that Jewish members were nearly five times more likely to face anti-Semitism charges than non-Jewish members!

White has been expelled retrospectively for an interview with *Socialist Appeal* seven months prior to its proscription. In July 2021, the NEC proscribed four groups—Socialist Appeal, Labour in Exile Network, Labour Against the Witchhunt and Resist.

Over the past week, White has spoken of Corbyn in glowing terms, as the socialist prime minister the working class never had. Yet despite her very public expulsion, Corbyn has, true to form, remained silent. His cowardly watchword is to avoid any conflict with the party’s right-wing. His Mahatma Gandhi routine serves the purpose of suppressing the class struggle and blocking any political challenge to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

No matter how grotesquely he abases himself before the right, Socialist Appeal, the Socialist Party, Labour in Exile, and their pseudo-left allies around the world will continue their pathetic promotion of Corbyn. They are determined to prevent any lessons being drawn by the working class from the shipwreck of the Corbynites’ populist and reformist project.

Lessons of history

Socialist Appeal clings to its insistence that the Labour Party is “two parties”: a party of the working class and a party of big business. It is the task of Marxists, they argue, to remain in the Labour Party to “provide a clear perspective and a firm backbone” to “a new layer of militant class fighters” who will emerge inside the Labour Party in the months ahead!

Ted Grant and Alan Woods founded Socialist Appeal in 1992. It was a split-off from the Militant Tendency that Grant had established in 1964, based on his rejection of Trotskyism. In 1950, Grant broke from the Fourth International in support of the Goldman-Morrow faction.

Albert Goldman and Felix Morrow were prominent party intellectuals in the Socialist Workers Party in the United States who adapted to the post-war re-stabilisation of capitalism. They claimed the fight for socialist revolution was unrealistic and that the Fourth International should restrict itself to fighting for bourgeois-democratic reforms, supporting the efforts of the social-democratic and Stalinist parties to channel the post-World War II struggles of the working class into reformist channels.

In 1953, Grant became a supporter of Michel Pablo’s revisionist International Secretariat which sought to politically liquidate the Trotskyist movement. The Pabloites rejected the revolutionary role of the working class, opposed the construction of an international vanguard party, and relegated Trotskyists to pressuring the existing Labour, Stalinist and bourgeois-nationalist leaderships in each country.

In Britain, Grant translated Pablo’s program of “bureaucratic self-reform” into a slavish defence of the Labour Party. His belief in the dominance of reformism was unshakeable. Militant was characterised by a type of tactical opportunism that adapted to the spontaneous protest movements of the working class and kept them within the confines of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, while promoting illusions in the parliamentary road to socialism.

The British Trotskyists led by Gerry Healy gave a powerful answer to Grant’s opportunism. Healy played a leading role in the international fight against Pabloism, supporting James P. Cannon’s Open Letter in defence of Trotskyism that led to the formation of the International Committee of the Fourth International in 1953. Less than three years later, amid the

political crisis of Stalinism triggered by Khrushchev’s Secret Speech and the Hungarian Revolution, the British Trotskyists strengthened their ranks, introducing new generations of workers and intellectuals to the political and theoretical heritage of Leon Trotsky’s struggle against Stalinism. While the Pabloites tailored their perspective to the alleged permanence of the Stalinist and Labour bureaucracies, Healy and the British Trotskyists won the political allegiance of thousands of workers through a patient and determined struggle to break the bureaucracies’ grip on the working class.

In the aftermath of World War II, the British Trotskyists worked inside the Labour Party where most politically conscious workers were active. But in 1958, as they won broader working-class support, Healy’s group faced a witch-hunt from the capitalist press and the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Healy responded decisively, announcing the formation of the Socialist Labour League (SLL) in February 1959.

As David North explained in his obituary of Cliff Slaughter, a leader of the SLL, “For Healy, the faction work inside the Labour Party, which it had conducted with extraordinary patience since 1947, had always been a tactic, valid to the extent that it did not undermine, to the point of crippling, its independent intervention in workers’ struggles on the basis of a genuine socialist program. For precisely this reason, by the end of the 1950s, the entry tactic as it had been implemented was exhausted. Serious practical involvement in the struggles of the working class led necessarily to a confrontation with the Labour Party and the TUC. The Trotskyists had to choose between persisting in their efforts to develop and expand, to the greatest extent possible, their interventions in the class struggles, or, instead, maintaining a passive, purely propagandist presence within the officially sanctioned structures of the Labour Party. They chose the former.”

Healy’s decision to found the SLL, based on the intensification of the fight against the reformist bureaucracies, strengthened the British Trotskyists immeasurably. Five years later, the SLL won the leadership of Labour’s youth wing, the Young Socialists (YS). When the Labour Party responded in 1964 by expelling its youth leaders, calling the police to evict them from Transport House and proscribing their newspaper *Keep Left*, Healy answered blow for blow. The YS was re-established as the youth movement of the SLL, a political victory grounded in the struggle against Pabloite opportunism. Meanwhile, the Labour Party reformed its youth section as the Labour Party Young Socialists, with the leadership taken up by the Grant group as loyal advocates of left reformism.

In its response to Corbyn’s leadership victory six years ago, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* based themselves on the political legacy of the ICFI’s struggle against reformism. In September 2015, amid euphoric declarations by the pseudo-left that Corbyn’s win was a victory for socialism, the SEP explained, “No one can seriously propose that this party—which, in its politics and organisation and the social composition of its apparatus, is Tory in all but name—can be transformed into an instrument of working class struggle. The British Labour Party did not begin with Blair. It is a bourgeois party of more than a century’s standing and a tried and tested instrument of British imperialism and its state machine. Whether led by Clement Attlee, James Callaghan or Jeremy Corbyn, its essence remains unaltered.

“From this standpoint, Corbyn’s insistence in the aftermath of the election that party unity matters above all else is a declaration of solidarity with an organisation that has proven itself, time and again, to be the principal political opponent of socialism in Britain.”

What the working class needs is not protest stunts against Starmer, but a conscious reckoning with those political tendencies responsible for his victory. The way forward lies in appropriating the history of the Trotskyist movement, including its persistent fight to establish the political independence of the working class from Corbyn’s rump of Labour “lefts” who defend capitalism.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact