

Sir Keir Starmer spouts anti-immigration rhetoric, offers “productivity” partnership between Labour, business and trade unions

Robert Stevens

24 November 2022

UK Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer’s speech before the annual conference of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) shifted the party’s stance on immigration even further to the right.

Starmer declared of Labour and big business, “our common goal must be to help the British economy off its immigration dependency”.

His Tuesday speech prompted Nigel Farage, the former leader of the far-right UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Brexit Party to state, “Starmer is now repeating the UKIP 2015 manifesto... Labour Party are now to the right of the Conservatives on immigration.”

The pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party headlined its article on the Labour leader’s speech, “Outrage as Keir Starmer blames low pay on immigration”.

But what outrage and from whom? *Socialist Worker* provides no quotes from representatives of Labour’s Corbynite “left” and cannot do so.

There was barely a murmur of protest against Starmer’s proposals from any of the Socialist Campaign Group, which makes up a tiny fraction of Labour MPs. Former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell said nothing. Diane Abbott, who earlier this year declared, “I am a loyal supporter of Keir Starmer”, could only tweet, without mentioning her party’s leader, “Chasing the anti-migrant vote is not even a vote-winner, and especially not for Labour.”

Former party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who Starmer booted out of the parliamentary party two years ago, responded with a couple of tweets and one of his regular op-eds in the *Independent*. But after uttering a few homilies that immigrant workers shouldn’t be pitted against native-born workers, he couldn’t bring himself to criticise anyone and refused to name either Starmer or even the Labour Party.

Nothing Starmer will ever do could provoke “outrage” among the Corbynites, let alone arouse them to fight the Blairites—not anti-immigrant rhetoric, not his banning shadow cabinet MPs from supporting striking workers picket

lines, or even backing NATO’s war against Russia.

Now a backbencher, with the whip removed and not subject to party discipline as an MP, Corbyn will still not oppose the Labour right—even as Labour is busy deselecting various “lefts” as election candidates and withdrawing membership from others.

Nothing else could be expected. During his five years as party leader (2015-2019) Corbyn capitulated to the Blairites on every issue. His 2017 general election manifesto said on immigration, “Labour will not make false promises on immigration numbers,” and emphasised, “Labour believes in fair rules and reasonable management of migration.” This was simply putting his predecessor Ed Miliband’s anti-immigration agenda of “controlled migration” in more polite language.

Labour’s 2019 manifesto declared that if Britain left the European Union, freedom of movement for EU citizens “will be subject to negotiations,” i.e., ended. Without defining it as a “points-based” immigration system, the manifesto also pledged that all immigration would be based on the requirements of the economy: “Our work visa system must fill any skills or labour shortages that arise.”

Starmer’s anti-immigration comments were only the most grotesque component of a right-wing screed delivered to the representatives of British business. The rest of his speech centred on offering a corporatist partnership with a Labour government, in alliance with the trade union bureaucracy who would function as an industrial police force.

Under his leadership, Labour was “Not just a pro-business party but a party that is proud of being pro-business. That respects the contribution profit makes to jobs, growth and our tax base... understands that backing private enterprise is the only way Britain pays its way in the world.”

Reinforcing his message, Starmer added, “Anyone who came to our conference in the summer, anyone I’ve met since being leader, more than a hundred CEOs in the last six months alone, knows this already. We’re ready for

partnership.”

Starmer informed his audience of millionaires and billionaires that the population face a winter “like no other. Where millions, the length and breadth of our country, will go without food or heating.” But he swiftly reassured those gathered at an event sponsored by companies including Shell and Visa, “Don’t get me wrong—I know people in this room are struggling too.”

Labour’s “first priority on tax has always been to scrap business rates,” he reassured them.

What Labour would offer that the Tories couldn’t was “economic stability... That’s why every policy my Labour Party announces will always be fully costed.” He would “reduce debt as a share of our economy—sound money in our public finances must come first. And we accept what this means—accept that we won’t be able to do things—good Labour things—as quickly as we might like.”

Accompanying this barely concealed promise of continued austerity was a commitment to securing the “productivity” increases big business needs, with “all of us—government, business, trade unions—to get behind the idea.”

“My Labour Government will care—must care—as much about raising productivity everywhere [i.e., making profit for business], as we have done in the past about redistribution... Big ambitions require public investment and we will provide it. But we know that the real game-changer is private investment.”

Watch David North’s remarks commemorating 25 years of the *World Socialist Web Site* and donate today.

In his speech to the Trades Union Congress (TUC) last month, Starmer announced he would establish an “Industrial Strategy Council” based on “a real partnership between Government, business and unions,” stressing “I’m not just pro-business, I want to partner with business to drive Britain forward... And I will say the same about trade unions to the CBI.”

For once, he was as good as his word, reminding the CBI, “I said at the TUC conference: my Labour Party is unashamedly pro-business and I say here today—that trade unions must be a crucial part of our partnership.”

The unions would not only play a central role in imposing labour discipline in the workplaces, speed ups, wage cuts and job losses. They would also be central to framing immigration policy in line with what the corporation required:

“We won’t ignore the need for workers to come to this country... That would be anti-growth and anti-business.” However, “with my Labour Government, any movement in our points-based migration system—whether via the skilled worker route, or the shortage occupations list—will come alongside new conditions for business.”

The trade unions would work with Labour to portray anti-immigrant measures as helping native-born workers and to promote the merits of a nationalist alliance with big business, supposedly to “boost” skills, training, better pay and conditions in a British version of Shangri-La through “negotiation with trade unions.”

CBI President Brian McBride responded, “Business welcomes Labour’s pledge to establish a modern industrial strategy... around the UK.”

One day after being feted by the CBI, Starmer was handed the Politician of the Year award at the *Spectator*’s Parliamentarian of the Year celebration. The rabidly pro-Tory magazine was previously edited by none other than Boris Johnson. Receiving the award, Starmer was applauded and cheered by the assembled Tories.

Starmer’s purging of anyone in any way connected to Labour’s reformist past is also proceeding apace. This week Labour expelled Andrea Egan, the president of the Unison trade union—and a party member for almost a decade—for sharing two articles from Socialist Appeal, a group proscribed by Labour in July 2021. The first occasion Egan had shared an article was before the proscription was even in place.

There can be no opposition to the Tories, outside of a political break by workers from the Labour Party. As Starmer’s audition before the CBI demonstrates, there is only a technical division of labour between the two parties of big business. But such a struggle cannot be waged through supporting the Corbynite “left”, whose loyalty is to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy first, last and always.

The fight against the destruction of workers’ living standards, the defence of the right of immigrants and opposition to war requires a new political axis of socialist internationalism. We urge workers and youth looking for an alternative to attend the December 10 online meeting hosted by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality to oppose the war in Ukraine. Register here today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact