Labour pledges to continue Tory policies: Workers need a socialist party

Thomas Scripps
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Following crushing defeats for the Conservative government in by-elections in Selby and Ainsty and Somerton and Frome, and a very narrow hold in Uxbridge and South Ruislip, and with Labour 17 points in the lead in the polls, party leader Sir Keir Starmer celebrated by denouncing "uncosted" policies.

Starmer and his top team have not missed an opportunity to make clear to Britain's ruling elite that a Labour government would follow to the letter the Tory agenda of austerity for workers and war against Russia.

A national policy conference July 22-23 made clear that as well as being "the party of NATO", Labour was also the party of economic war on the working class. The policy conference agreed an economic programme excluding even minimal policies like a £15 minimum wage, free school meals and a ban on zero hours contracts.

A spokesperson crowed, "There are no unfunded spending commitments in the document," adding that this was "another proof point that shows that Keir Starmer has changed the Labour party and is ready to change the country in government, built on the rock of economic responsibility and strong fiscal rules."

This follows a *BBC Radio 4 Today* interview with Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves in which she refused to say Labour would abolish two of the most hated and punitive planks of the Tories austerity agenda—the bedroom tax, cutting social welfare for those classed as having a spare bedroom, and the two-child benefit cap, preventing parents from claiming child benefit for their third or any subsequent child. Starmer had earlier said of the two-child cap, "We're not changing that policy."

Reeves made clear that this was not all. Labour cannot be counted on to reverse a single measure enacted by the Tories in a 13-year onslaught on the working class. Saying she had "lost count of the number of times I've gone through the division lobbies and voted against what the government have done," Reeves continued, "Does that mean we're going to be able to reverse all of those things? The sad truth is we're not going to be able to do that because of the dire economic inheritance that an incoming Labour government will face."

Asked about another senior Labour figure saying there were six policies Labour wanted to scrap but could not, Reeves replied, "The truth is there's more than six things that an incoming Labour government won't be able to do."

Never before, not even under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown or Ed Miliband, has Labour entered the run up to a general election promising such complete continuity with the Tory government.

It is the same story in every area of policy.

Labour is committed to the US-NATO led war against Russia in Ukraine and the ramped up military spending and social spending cuts required to fuel it. This is posed most starkly in the case of health spending, where Starmer and Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting have repeatedly insisted the National Health Service is "not a shrine" and should not expect more funding from Labour.

The party is just as hostile to the rights of migrants as the government, framing its criticisms entirely in terms of the Tories' "unworkable" and "costly" efforts to deport asylum seekers. It is reversing already inadequate climate pledges made less than two years ago in the name of "financial stability".

Nothing is left of the "lesser evil" line on which all of Labour's promoters—from trade union leaders and *Guardian* columnists to various pseudo-left groups—have relied on for years. Starmer is making painfully clear that the replacement of the Tories by Labour in government would change nothing.

The great lie perpetrated by former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was to suggest otherwise—that the Labour Party could be transformed and in turn transform society

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through a programme of lukewarm reforms. His own five years as Labour leader proved that this was a fraud. The party apparatus he refused to challenge was prepared to self-destruct rather than see him take office. His supporters have either been driven out or accommodated themselves wholesale to Starmer's regime.

No amount of "pressure" will change these facts. Parliament and its pro-capitalist parties are a bulwark of the banks, the major corporations and the super rich against the population. The only path to resolving the enormous crises that confront the working class—war, climate breakdown, crumbling social services, the lack of affordable housing and declining working conditions—is a revolutionary struggle against inequality and the control of the economy by an unaccountable financial oligarchy. This requires an immediate and implacable struggle to build a new revolutionary leadership, a socialist party of the working class.

Pseudo-left organisations such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) dedicate themselves to preventing workers from drawing this conclusion. Having championed Corbyn's leadership as the beginning of a socialist transformation of the Labour Party, the SWP now encourages workers to abandon any hope of building a revolutionary alternative to it.

In an article published July 28, "The left must be ready to fight a Keir Starmer Labour government", *Socialist Worker* editor Charlie Kimber writes, "Labour will break strikes, expel refugees to their deaths, let the climate crisis rip and lock up those who resist its rule." He adds that so-called "left challenges" to Labour from various Corbynites "see their mission as forcing their re-entry into the Labour Party after having been suspended, sidelined or expelled," and that "At present electoral challenges to Labour won't mobilise more than a small minority."

Workers' response, he argues, must be "to struggle through strikes and protests and defiance."

What does this mean? Kimber insists that workers must call on the trade union bureaucracy to "commit now to a '100 days' programme to fight" a Starmer-led government. These are the same trade union leaders that Kimber describes earlier in the article as being "involved in a conscious process of self?deception and peddling myths to their members" about the prospects for a Labour government.

Nevertheless, these bureaucrats should demand above inflation pay rises, the repeal of the worst of the anti-strike laws and anti-migrant laws, and to refusing licenses for new oil, gas and coal projects.

Even by the standards of the Corbynites once so enthusiastically championed by the SWP, this is a gutless programme. Above all it avoids any mention of the central political task facing the working class of opposing NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine. The SWP is formally opposed to the war but rejects absolutely any struggle against a trade union and Labour bureaucracy which the Tories depend on to demobilise the working class and clear the way for the war to proceed.

The SWP's line is so carefully calibrated to what the union bureaucracy would find acceptable that it does not even raise demands such as the defence of the National Health Service or the nationalisation of essential services that would have once been commonplace.

Kimber's is a perspective for political prostration. His message is, "Abandon hope now because there is no hope anyway!"

The domination of the Labour Party over the working class is accepted as a permanent state of affairs. Workers are forever consigned to a series of ever-more limited defensive struggles, desperately placing pressure on the right-wing union bureaucracy that will supposedly in turn place pressure on equally right-wing Labour and Tory governments.

The collapse of reformist, social democratic politics and the transformation of the trade unions into the allies of the corporations—all evident even in what Kimber writes—are covered over with the claim that Labour is still "a party that rests on workers' organisations," meaning the unions. This is a lie, told to divert attention from the burning political question of our time: the need to build a socialist party of the working class on the principles of Marxism upheld by the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Parties.

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