

Sir Keir Starmer praises Margaret Thatcher: The Labour Party versus the working class

Thomas Scripps
5 December 2023

In a comment for the *Sunday Telegraph*, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer extended “the hand of friendship” to Tory voters and praised Margaret Thatcher’s efforts “to drag Britain out of its stupor by setting loose our natural entrepreneurialism.”

The article, “Voters have been betrayed on Brexit and immigration. I stand ready to deliver”, is Starmer’s fourteenth for the house paper of the Conservative right since becoming Labour leader. In it, he pledges “iron-clad fiscal rules”, to “use the full force of Britain’s intelligence and policing” against asylum seekers crossing the Channel in small boats, and that Labour is the party for those who “believe that Britain needs stability, order, security... that this country needs to change to get back to greatness.”

Starmer’s paragraph on Thatcher also praises how Tony Blair “reimagined a stale, outdated Labour Party into one that could seize the optimism of the late 90s” and how Clement Attlee “wrote that Labour must be a party of duty and patriotism, not abstract theory.”

Today’s Labour Party “has changed dramatically in the last three years,” using “shock therapy”—the expulsion and resignation of thousands of members—to “put country before party.”

This is the culmination of Labour’s campaign to prove itself a dependable, like-for-like replacement for a crisis-ridden Tory government. It comes three months after Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves told the same newspaper that Labour had no spending plans to tackle the UK’s unprecedented social crisis, two months after Labour’s annual conference set out a pitch for authoritarianism, austerity and war, and amid the party’s ongoing support for Israel’s genocide in Gaza.

Thatcher is lauded in right-wing circles as the pre-eminent class war leader of British imperialism in the post-war period, mobilising the police and the armed forces against the working class, especially during the 1984-85 miners’ strike, as she ushered in a period of soaring unemployment, swingeing cuts to social welfare, sweeping privatisations and skyrocketing inequality. She adopted the language of the far-

right to whip up hostility to immigrants she claimed had “swamped” the country.

By praising what he later described to the BBC as Thatcher’s “sense of purpose”, Starmer is signalling to the ruling class that he will carry out a similarly vicious offensive in office.

He confirmed this message in a speech to the Resolution Foundation Monday where he warned, “Anyone who expects an incoming Labour government to quickly turn on the spending taps is going to be disappointed.”

Starmer went on to draw an unfavourable comparison with previous economic crises. “This is worse than the 1970s, worse than the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s, and worse even than the great crash of 2008.” All of which were responded to by the ruling class—Tory and Labour governments alike—with a staggering assault on the social position of the working class.

“The comparison with 2010 is instructive,” he continued, referring to the start of a wave of austerity that has sent virtually every metric of social progress into reverse. “Now, debt and interest rates are much higher. Britain’s standing is diminished. Growth is stagnant and public services are on their knees. Taxes are higher than at any time since the war, none of which was true in 2010.”

In other words, the years to come will involve even more savage assaults on the working class than the last 13 years, with Starmer already indicating that immigrants will be scapegoated for this.

Nothing will be done to touch the grotesque fortunes of the super-rich. The Labour leader made a point of telling the Resolution Foundation, “This isn’t... unequal concentrations of wealth and opportunity.”

Talk of a “backlash” in the Labour Party against Starmer’s piece in the *Telegraph* has been wildly overblown. The vast majority of its MPs are in total agreement, and the dwindling Labour “left” is prepared to keep its personal discomfort to itself rather than challenge Starmer.

The embrace of Thatcher is nothing new. Her inflicting defeats on the working class in the 1980s was made possible

only by the rightward lurch of the Labour Party under Neil Kinnock, and the systematic demobilisation and betrayal of every workers' struggle by the Trades Union Congress, above all through the isolation of the miners.

Stalinist academics such as Eric Hobsbawm, in his "Forward March of Labour Halted," and Stuart Hall, in his "The Great Moving Right Show," portrayed "Thatcherism" as an all-conquering force that could not be defeated through class struggle but only "challenged" on how cultural and social questions should be defined. This became the main ideological taproot for the emergence of New Labour and its wholesale embrace of Thatcherite "free market" policies.

Thatcher herself observed that her greatest political achievement was Tony Blair and New Labour.

Defending Starmer's comments on LBC Radio, Labour's national campaign coordinator Pat McFadden explained, "I remember when Gordon Brown was prime minister, he invited Mrs Thatcher to tea at No 10 and he described her as a conviction politician who saw the need for change... the truth is Gordon Brown praised her, Tony Blair said she was a towering figure, now Keir's said what he said."

The continuity described by McFadden shows Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party for what it was: the defence of a right-wing organisation against the mass left-wing movement of workers and young people that brought him to power.

Starmer owes his position today to Corbyn's efforts to block any fight against the right-wing majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party and his surrendering of his supporters to scurrilous political witch-hunts, especially over false claims of antisemitism. Under the cover of maintaining a political "broad church", Corbyn's leadership preserved the Labour Party as a tool of British imperialism and provided an incubator for Starmer's shadow cabinet.

Workers are confronted with a stark reality. There is no party in parliament which they can support, even on the grounds of the "lesser of two evils". This has never been a sound basis for casting a vote for a capitalist party. But today it simply does not exist. The Labour Party is indistinguishable from the Tory Party and proudly proclaims the fact. The Corbyn experience confirms that there is no basis for changing this.

If it is to defend its social interests, the working class must build its own independent party. Within days of Corbyn's election as leader, the Socialist Equality Party warned, "No one can seriously propose that this [Labour] 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."

Throughout the attack on Corbyn's supporters who joined Labour to fight the right, the SEP took up their defence

while explaining that Corbyn's "insistence that preserving party unity will allow Labour to form a government 'of the many, not the few'" was "a dangerous fallacy, which disarms workers and young people in the face of political conspirators working at the highest levels of the state who will stop at nothing in their defence of the financial oligarchy."

In opposing Corbyn, the SEP based itself on the theoretical and political traditions of Trotskyism, the Marxism of the Twenty-First Century, which must animate any genuinely socialist response to the capitalist crisis.

Building the SEP is an urgent necessity. The genocide in Gaza and the total support it has received from all the imperialist powers is the most brutal expression of the state of class and national antagonisms throughout the world—the result of decades of worsening inequality and austerity, the impact of the pandemic and the eruption of bloody new wars.

The Tories and the Labour Party, like their counterparts internationally, are both preparing for a confrontation with the working class. Starmer warned in his Resolution Foundation speech, "A political consensus that if you work hard and play by the rules, you will get on, a glue that binds British society together, has become nothing short of a lie—for millions. It's a well from which so many political horrors can spring."

Their response is to strengthen the police, tear up democratic rights and crack down on strikes and the hundreds of thousands protesting Israel's war. Workers and young people must find their answer in the international socialist movement represented by the Socialist Equality Parties and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWP and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wswp.org/contact](https://www.wswp.org/contact)