

The Revolutionary Communist Party and Corbyn and Sultana's new party: Naked opportunism and political amnesia

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The Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) proclaims an agenda shared with all of Britain's pseudo-left groups of joining and supposedly imparting a revolutionary character to the new party announced by former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and MP Zara Sultana.

Unlike its competitors, it has the additional task of reversing its claim, barely two years old, that Corbynite reformism is a dead letter in the working class and among young people. This was the basis for the International Marxist Tendency (IMT) relaunching itself as the Revolutionary Communist International.

Their U-turn was so abrupt, following immediately on Sultana's July 3 resignation from Labour and declaration of a new party, that even Corbyn was still insisting at the time that discussions were "ongoing."

On July 4, the RCP's public face and national campaigns coordinator Fiona Lali issued "An open letter to Jeremy Corbyn and Zara Sultana: 'Now is the time to be bold'."

A brief excursion into the "Lessons of the past" and "the mistakes that threw the Corbyn movement back" were "summed up by the following: the left leaders tried to accommodate our movement to the representatives of the capitalist system—the Blairites and the establishment." But Lali immediately insisted, "Now is not just a time to look backwards, however. We must also look forwards."

Acknowledging that she has been directly involved in some of the discussions on "whether and how to set up a new party," she proposed that what she referred to as "Our party" should be based on an "anti-capitalist" and "revolutionary programme." "My appeal to Jeremy and Zara is this: now is the time to be bold."

On July 24, the RCP responded to the actual announcement of a new party by Corbyn and Sultana with a declaration, "The RCP is getting on board. Fight for real change! Fight for revolution!... We will be mobilising our members to help make a success of this new—much-needed—party."

Joining the RCP was now officially recast as subsidiary to joining "Corbyn and Sultana's new party" and building "a revolutionary communist force" within it. Its members would play the role of "hoping to fill in the details of the rough outline already sketched by Jeremy and Zara."

Back to the future with the RCP

The turn towards Corbyn based on the transparently spurious assertion that he can be persuaded to adopt a revolutionary perspective is a return to political form for the RCP.

The group, now led by Alan Woods, was founded by Ted Grant. He

broke from the Fourth International following the Second World War and subsequently built his entire perspective for decades on the argument that the postwar restabilisation of capitalism, made possible only by the suppression of revolutionary struggles by Stalinism, had disproved Trotsky's revolutionary prognosis. Instead, for a protracted historical period, independent revolutionary action by the proletariat was impossible thanks to the completion of the "democratic counter-revolution," necessitating extended entry into the Labour Party in Britain while advocating an essentially left reformist programme of achieving socialism through Labour's nationalisation of the top 200 monopolies.

The entire activity of what became known as the Militant Tendency, and continued by its splinter led by Woods, was based on the assertion that entry work in Labour—justified above all by its base in the trade unions—could push it to adopt a socialist programme. Woods and Grant stuck rigidly to this scenario throughout the leadership of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband. And no tendency was more enthused when Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader of Britain's Labour Party in 2015.

The IMT and its British affiliate Socialist Appeal had also joined the rest of the pseudo-left in backing Syriza in Greece, with disastrous results, which they eventually blamed on its lacking firm roots in the working class—i.e., trade union backing. This they suggested post-festum would have prevented its leadership from capitulating to the European Union and International Monetary Fund's demands for the imposition of austerity.

They urged workers, young people and trade unions alike to join or affiliate to Labour to help the "Corbyn revolution" transform the party. In October 2017, the IMT wrote of Corbyn's "government in waiting" and efforts by "The Establishment" to control "the next PM", insisting that Corbyn would not buckle like Syriza and its leader Alexis Tsipras had done:

There is no doubt that a Left Labour government would face similar pressure from all quarters if in power... However, Britain is not Greece; Labour is not Syriza; and Corbyn is not Tsipras. The Labour Party has a far greater historical weight and much deeper roots within the working class than Syriza ever had. It is not an ephemeral trend, but the traditional mass party of the British working class, with strong links to the trade unions.

By December 2019 the "Corbyn revolution" was over. Having lost a second general election to the Tories he resigned as party leader, paving the way for Sir Keir Starmer. Even then the IMT tried to hold the line, with Woods writing of the Blairites' "last desperate attempt at regaining

control. At a certain point, the right wing will either split, or be vomited out. This will push Labour far to the left, opening up serious possibilities for the Marxist tendency.”

Selling the myth of a socialist Labour Party to the last

When the RCP today tries to portray itself as having taken a critical attitude to Corbyn’s time as Labour leader, this is largely confined to a “for the record” linking to carefully selected previous articles, rather than making any embarrassing contemporary remarks that would possibly prevent their incorporation into the new party.

But even here a sleight of hand is involved. The first article linked to by Lali was only published on September 11, 2020, and is advanced as an examination of, “The Corbyn movement—5 years on: Lessons for the Left.” These were drawn long after the political project they embraced had ended in defeat.

Its long and purely descriptive account still managed to assert that “An historic mass movement—an unstoppable force had been created.”

By turns, there are belated criticisms of “Corbyn and his team” for attempting “to compromise with his critics,” combined with demagogic claims that “The Blairites were crushed... completely discredited, revealed for the traitors that they were (and are). Their failed assassination attempt had only made Corbyn’s position as leader unassailable.” This was a situation Corbyn is said to have tragically failed to exploit.

The message is that a successful outcome had only been prevented because the “left leaders” had failed to “stand firm.”

“Revolution” had therefore given way to “counter-revolution”, but “The biggest danger is demoralisation. Understandably, thousands have ripped up their membership cards in disgust at Starmer’s rightward turn. It is the responsibility of the leaders of the Corbyn movement to turn the situation around. Labour’s civil war is far from over. It is a struggle of living forces—the outcome of which is yet to be decided.”

With their spine stiffened by the “Marxists”, the Corbynites could still “drive the Blairites and bureaucrats out of the [Parliamentary Labour Party] and Labour HQ and transform Labour back into the mass social movement that it was becoming at the height of the Corbyn era.”

It was only in mid-2022 that the public pronouncements of Socialist Appeal group shifted towards advocating for an independent party, with Woods writing in January 2023, “Why has there not been a revolution? – The need for revolutionary leadership”, in which he said of the collapse of Corbynism that “a fatal element was the role played by Corbyn himself” and had led to “a disgraceful rout.”

In a January 2024 report to the international meeting, published February 14, Woods explained the IMT’s intention to relaunch itself as the Revolutionary Communist International. Driven by the collapse of his organisation’s entire perspective, he now swung wildly leftward, asserting that the failure of Corbynism and similar “left reformist” formations meant that young people today were being transformed into communists en masse: “thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, probably millions of young people are already drawing the correct conclusions. They’ve already accepted the idea of communism. They desire communism.”

Woods’ political scenario, centred on an objectivist assertion of the spontaneous development of revolutionary consciousness, has not survived its first political challenge.

Significant forces within the left representatives of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, fully aware of the developing rift between the working class and Starmer’s rightward careening Labour Party, have pushed a reluctant Corbyn and a more radical sounding Sultana to spearhead an

effort to trap young people in particular behind a new party project by exploiting reformist illusions the RCP claimed were a thing of the past.

Woods forced to issue a corrective

Politically unprepared for this development, and educated for decades in the IMT’s opportunism, large sections of its membership have been so taken up with enthusiasm for new Corbynite party that alarm bells began ringing for Woods. On the one hand, he feared losing a wing of his cadre to Jeremy and Zarah; on the other, he worried how recruits won in the last two years on a perspective of building an independent communist party would react to such open adulation.

On July 28, Woods issued an extended corrective to his party’s uncritical statements, “Jeremy Corbyn’s new party: what does it mean, and what attitude should communists take towards it?”

Remarkably, he felt forced to draw himself up to full height and proclaim, “There is no question whatsoever of liquidating the Revolutionary Communist Party... On this question, there can be no compromise.”

Having to publicly insist on such a red line shows an awareness on Woods’ part of powerful tendencies towards the liquidation of his tendency into what Corbyn provisionally calls “Your Party” and Lali has already embraced as “Our party.”

The “strong wave of support and enthusiasm” for the new party, he wrote, was “not surprising” as the “reactionary policies pursued by the Starmer government had been a slap in the face for millions of people who voted for the Labour Party, hoping for a change.” Moreover, “Given the weakness of the forces of genuine Marxism at the present time, that vacuum could only be filled by some kind of left reformist alternative.”

He then lists a series of caveats meant to rectify the near political amnesia extended in his party’s other statements, including noting that Corbyn hitherto “only saw reaction on all sides” because he lacked “any knowledge of dialectics” and had held up the formation of a new party “for a long time by his constant vacillations and hesitation.”

Nevertheless, he stresses, “This is a colossal step in the direction of a revolutionary transformation”, with millions of people “looking for a way out of the crisis, turning first to one option, then another.” This included “right wing demagogues like Trump”, whose presidency, he is at pains to add, “sectarian imbeciles and left reformists who can see no further than the end of their noses interpret... as the rise of fascist reaction.”

“The announcement of a new left party in Britain undoubtedly opens new possibilities for the communists,” Woods states, but warns his members that their attitude “cannot be determined by temporary moods of enthusiasm among the masses... In particular, we must firmly bear in mind the lessons of the past in relation to left reformism. We have the experience of Tsipras in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Sanders in the USA, and last but not least, Jeremy Corbyn in Britain... They all enjoyed a considerable level of enthusiasm in the beginning. But in the end, it all ended in tears, because they finally capitulated to the establishment.”

There follows a thumbnail sketch of Corbyn’s refusal “to mobilise the mass base that he had in order to crush the Parliamentary Labour Party, deselecting right-wing Labour MPs.” Left reformists, he adds, “always cling to the right reformists, fearing a split.... His defeat was therefore absolutely inevitable, and it was the direct result of his own left reformist policies.”

In this spirit the RCP must now “participate, side by side with the masses of the working class, and connect the finished programme of socialist revolution with the unfinished yearning of the most advanced elements for a fundamental revolutionary change.”

Left apologists for the Corbynites

Orthodoxies listed, Woods makes clear that it is only the most naked forms of political accommodation to Corbynism that he is opposing, and not the essential orientation of the RCP acting as his left apologists, especially among those most critical of his record of capitulation and betrayal.

His argument requires desperately tortured formulations, straining to maintain a “critical” stance while still holding out the prospect of a revolutionary development under Corbyn.

We are told that it is “too early to say what the actual physiognomy of the new party will be” because “the crucial question is whether the leadership of this party really stands for a fundamental transformation of society. By this we mean the abolition of capitalism and the assumption of power by the working class.”

But even after all the experiences he listed previously, including Corbyn’s five years leading the Labour Party and five years of his refusal to stand against it, Woods insists, “We cannot answer this question in advance.”

This is the case even though “in all probability, the left reformist nature of the leadership will incline them to the position that it is possible to solve the problems of the working class without a radical break with capitalism and private ownership of the means of production.”

“We cannot answer this question” yet, it is “too early” to say, but “in all probability” a “reformist leadership” will be “incline[d]” to oppose “a radical break with capitalism”! This is crude sophistry, especially when the “reformist” in question is the 76-year-old Corbyn with decades of political life behind him. There are few more well-known quantities in world politics.

In any event, the RCP, while standing “on the programme of socialist revolution”, will stand side by side with Corbyn in fighting for reforms without which “the socialist revolution would be an impossible utopia.”

Woods develops an entirely novel and anti-Marxist critique of reformism, wholly devoid of an historical or class character. “Our criticism of the right reformists is precisely that they do not fight effectively for reforms”, he writes, rather than identifying them as the unalloyed political servants of the bourgeoisie. He then urges his readers to recognise that, in contrast to the right-wing, the left reformists sincerely “believe that it is possible to achieve ambitious reforms and improvements in living standards within the limits of the capitalist system.”

Recognising such good intentions, therefore, “Whenever Jeremy Corbyn takes a step in the right direction, we will support him. But whenever he takes a step back, whenever he shows equivocations and vacillations (which he has done on many occasions) we reserve the right to criticise him in a firm but comradely manner.”

Leon Trotsky and the revolutionary attitude to the left reformists

Woods’ proposed “comradely” criticisms, amid “fruitful and honest collaboration with the left reformists” have nothing in common with Marxism, which demands a relentless exposure of these “lefts.”

Above all they repudiate the central insistence of Trotsky that social revolution in Britain depends on breaking the working class from the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy and that this depends on the

systematic exposure of its left representatives, whose rhetoric is designed to chime with the socialist sentiment of the leftward moving masses to prevent this taking revolutionary forms.

We are only a few months away from the centenary of the 1926 General Strike—a seminal experience for the British and international working class. How did Trotsky seek to prepare and guide the working class through this confrontation?

He directed his fire above all against the Independent Labour Party, which then made up the left-wing of the Labour Party. Trotsky was scathing of this political tendency, which stood far to the left of the Corbynites today.

He indicted the “Fabians, the ILPers and the conservative trade union bureaucrats” as “the most counterrevolutionary force in Great Britain” for their “systematically poisoning the labour movement, clouding the consciousness of the proletariat and paralysing its will.” It was “only thanks to them that Toryism, Liberalism, the Church, the monarchy, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie continue to survive.”

In words that constitute an indictment of the RCP’s political amnesia regarding Corbyn’s new party, Trotsky wrote of “the ‘left’ leaders” who “readily changed their line” to accommodate pressure from below: “to evaluate them one must take both sides of the matter into account. Revolutionaries need a good memory.”

He emphasised how “it must be clearly understood that all the traditions, organizational habits and the ideas of all the already existing groupings in the labour movement in different forms and with different slogans predispose them either towards direct treachery or towards compromise.”

Today, the RCP seeks to give a party as yet without formal members, led by a shadowy committee of tried-and-tested Corbynites, a revolutionary programme. Trotsky wrote clearly of the ILP, which had deep connections with masses of workers and declared its sympathy with the Russian revolution, “It would be the greatest illusion to think that the Independents’ party is capable of evolving into a revolutionary party of the proletariat.”

That was the role of a Bolshevik-type party alone, whose path lay “not only through an irreconcilable struggle against capital’s special agency in the shape of the [J.H.] Thomas-[Ramsay] MacDonald [right-wing] clique but also through the systematic unmasking of the left muddleheads by means of whom alone MacDonald and Thomas can maintain their positions.”

These arguments were a de facto polemic against the opportunist line then being advocated by the Communist International under Joseph Stalin, which saw the British Communist Party subordinated to the General Council of the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party leaders through the “lefts” organised in the Anglo-Russian Committee. The result was not only the betrayal of the General Strike, but a betrayal whose causes were left unclarified in the British working class, producing a prolonged period of retreat.

How the revolutionary party breaks workers from the “lefts”

At all points, Trotsky differentiated sharply between the ILP leaders and the working-class masses who then followed them, but whose sentiments and political trajectory were far to their left. He explained how the “Independents’ current role is brought about by the fact that their path has crossed the path of the proletariat. But this in no way means that these paths have merged for good.”

What was decisive was not the temporary alignment, but the coming clash: “The rapid growth in the Independents’ influence is but a reflection of the exceptional power of working-class pressure; but it is just this

pressure, generated by the whole situation, that will throw the British workers into collision with the Independent leaders.”

In another, sharper, formulation, Trotsky explained, “They represent the expression of a shift but also its brake.”

For the workers to emerge victorious from this clash required the continuous intervention of the Marxist party.

The ILP leaders depended for their position on the degree to which “the trade union bureaucracy can weaken, neutralise and distort the independent class pressure of the proletariat. But the Communist Party will on the contrary be able to take the lead of the working class only in so far as it enters into an implacable conflict with the conservative bureaucracy in the trade unions and the Labour Party.”

By “implacable conflict”, Trotsky meant “a ruthless criticism of all the leading staff of the British labour movement”, a “day-to-day exposure” and “a perpetual, systematic, inflexible, untiring and irreconcilable unmasking of the quasi-left leaders of every hue, of their confusion, of their compromises and of their reticence.”

For the RCP, their emphasis is not on the inevitable clash between the workers and their leaders but the temporary alignment. They write in “The struggle against reformism”, published July 15, that “We must take as our starting point the consciousness of the masses as it is now, including any illusions they might have.”

The task of Marxists is not to start from the illusions workers have, but to systematically combat reformist illusions and raise the consciousness of the working class to an understanding of the revolutionary tasks that are posed by the objective situation.

This includes a consistent effort to educate workers so they can draw the necessary conclusions from what the RCP acknowledges regarding Corbyn, Bernie Sanders and Syriza, that “None have delivered a single meaningful reform” because they have never waged a political struggle against the right-wing.

Preparing the working class for socialist revolution is impossible without doing the political work to “dismiss the ‘reformist illusions’ of the masses... to inform the workers that they are making a mistake, that their leaders will betray,” all of which is raised in disparaging terms by the RCP. This, they claim, is “all well and good in the abstract... But it would still be utterly self-defeating and false, precisely because it is so abstract.”

For the RCP, a concrete programme is equated with first-name-terms appeals to “Jeremy and Zarah.” But unity with the masses does not mean even a hint of unity with the leaders, who must be exposed before workers as part of their political education and tempering.

Without this, the Corbynites—far more so than the ILP whom Trotsky is describing here—will convert the working class’s “as yet vaguely defined but profound and stubborn aspiration to free itself from [Conservative Party leader Stanley] Baldwin and [Labour leader Ramsay] MacDonald into left phrases of opposition which do not place any obligations upon them.”

When the British edition of *Where is Britain Going?* was published, Trotsky was critical of the British Communist Party for securing an introduction by H.N. Brailsford, then editor of the ILP newspaper. “We do need a unity of front with the working masses,” Trotsky argued, “But the unity or a semi-unity of a literary front with Brailsford signifies but an aggravation of that ideological chaos in which the British labour movement is rich enough as it is.”

Brailsford was seeking a left cover by association with Trotsky. But the communists’

their own inclinations. The rubbish of the past still separates the leftward moving masses from the programme of communism with a thick layer. So much more impermissible is it then to add even a shred to this garbage. In fighting for the interests of the miners the communists are prepared to take several steps alongside Mr Brailsford in this struggle. But with no ideological blocs, and no united front in the field of theory and programme! And this very Brailsford himself puts it thus with regard to the American edition of our book: “We are separated from these people by a gulf.” Correct, correct and three times correct! But from the standpoint of Marxism there is nothing more criminal than to throw literary olive branches across this political gulf: the worker who is deceived by the camouflage will set his foot down and fall through.

Objectivism in support of opportunism

Such fundamental lessons are brushed aside by the RCP: “To simply lecture the working class on the need to overthrow capitalism, without connecting this general truth to the concrete demands of the living movement, is the hallmark of sectarianism.”

They deliberately ignore the fact that among the most vital “concrete demands of the living movement” is the exposure of the Corbynites—the forging of the political independence of the working class.

The RCP’s presentation of the process by which “revolutionary consciousness actually develops” presents matters as if the revolutionary party merely takes receipt of a revolutionary situation. The British general strike is even cited as an example, and “it is precisely here where the question of leadership becomes decisive.” But that leadership can only be decisive to the degree that it has gathered around itself a large enough force in the working class trained to see the left betrayers for what they are and to oppose them at every turn.

The movement of the British workers was enormous. It was, however, “dictated by the logic of the situation far more than by the logic of consciousness,” in Trotsky’s words. “The British working class had no other choice” and neither did the left-talkers, who were forced to mouth support. This was the “strength of the strike—but also its weakness,” precisely because there was not a clear idea in the working class of its political programme and of who its friends and enemies were.

As Trotsky cautioned:

[I]t would be the utmost disgrace to brush aside the struggle against opportunism in the top leadership by alluding to the profound revolutionary processes taking place in the working class. Such a supposedly “profound” approach stems entirely from a failure to understand the role and the significance of the party in the movement of the working class and especially in the revolution. For it has always been centrism which has cloaked and continues to cloak the sins of opportunism with solemn references to the objective tendencies of development. Is it worth wasting time and energy in fighting the muddleheads of the type of Wheatley, Brailsford, Purcell, Kirkwood and others, now that revolutionary aspirations are on the increase in the proletariat, now that the trade unions are turning towards co-operation with the Soviet trade unions and so on and so forth? But in actual fact expressed in this alleged revolutionary objectivism is merely an effort to shirk revolutionary tasks by shifting them on to the shoulders of the so-called historical process.

first obligation is that of destroying ideological masks. The British working masses are immeasurably more to the left than Brailsford but they have not yet found the appropriate language for

The same opportunist objectivism ran through the founding documents of the RCP and its International, for all the radical talk about the complete discrediting of all other left forces. It is making itself felt today in its attitude to the new Corbynite party.

Arming the working class for the struggles ahead

Outlining its attitude towards the Corbyn/Sultana party, the Socialist Equality Party explained that, objectively, this was “a milestone in the ongoing breakup of the Labour Party. Millions of workers and young people have drawn the conclusion that Labour, under the leadership of Keir Starmer, is an irredeemably right-wing, pro-business party of warmongers and defenders of genocide in Gaza.”

But we also stressed:

Although Corbyn has been forced to make an organisational break from Labour, his new party does not represent a political break from Labourism. It advocates only limited reforms to be pursued through parliament—a Labour Party Mark II...

None of this is changed, or will be changed in the future, by the immediate and universal support for this initiative given by numerous pseudo-left tendencies which profess to be revolutionary. The role of groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) and Socialist Party (SP) will be as cheerleaders and apologists for this new reformist party. It is they who will adapt to the politics of Corbyn, and not the other way around.

We explained:

The working class in Britain and internationally faces a world in which the super-rich oligarchy monopolises an ever greater percentage of the world's wealth and the imperialist powers build up their militaries for wars for territory and resources. Workers' collapsing living standards are the price to be paid, and police-state measures deployed and right-wing parties cultivated to repress resistance.

Attempts to implement any of the reforms advocated by Corbyn's party will be met with a combination of economic warfare, and far-right and military violence. Even the prospect of a Prime Minister Corbyn—managed then by his majority-Blairite parliamentary party—was enough to prompt threats of assassination and a military coup.

The ruling class will respond to any challenge to the destruction of living standards and imperialist war with savage repression. This has been demonstrated by the Starmer government's arrest of hundreds of anti-genocide protesters and banning of Palestine Action under anti-terror laws. Victory will require a revolutionary mobilisation of the working class—nationalising critical industries, confiscating the wealth of the billionaires and an international socialist strategy.

Mortally afraid of such a movement, Corbyn and the leadership of his new party would follow the example of Syriza—likely in even more prostrate fashion. The role of the SWP, RCP and SP is to disarm the working class in the face of these political realities.

And we set as our political task:

The Socialist Equality Party will do everything possible to alert workers to the situation and arm them with the necessary programme and leadership. We will not be advocates of and apologists for “Your Party”. It is not ours. We will engage energetically with the many workers and young people who currently look to Corbyn for leadership and seek to educate them in the fundamental historical experiences of the past decade and beyond, which point to the necessity for a revolutionary, internationalist and socialist perspective and party.

It is this Trotskyist perspective which is needed to guide the revolutionary work of socialist-minded workers and youth. Contact the SEP today.



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