

Zarah Sultana's bid for leadership of Britain's new left party: "Corbynism capitulated"

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Zarah Sultana, who joined former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn last month to announce a new left-wing party to "take on the rich and powerful", used an interview with *New Left Review* (NLR) last week to attack the political record of "Corbynism".

Oliver Eagleton, NLR's Associate Editor (and the son of Terry Eagleton), asked the 31-year-old MP who resigned from the Labour Party on July 3: "For many people of our generation, Corbynism set a paradigm for radical politics. Considering the historical gulf between 2015 and 2025, though, how should we adapt it to the present?"

Sultana replied: "I think we're in a very different political moment. We have to build on the strengths of Corbynism – its energy, mass appeal and bold policy platform – and we also have to recognise its limitations. It capitulated to the IHRA [International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance] definition of antisemitism, which famously equates it with anti-Zionism... It triangulated on Brexit, which alienated huge numbers of voters. It abandoned mandatory reselection of MPs for the trigger ballot compromise, keeping many of the party's undemocratic structures in place."

She continued: "When it came under attack from the state and the media, it should have fought back, recognising that these are our class enemies. But instead it was frightened and far too conciliatory. This was a serious mistake. If we're contesting state power, we're going to face a major backlash, and we need to have the institutional resilience to withstand it. You cannot give these people an inch."

Sultana's leadership pitch against "Corbynism" reflects two related processes: Firstly, substantial sections of the former Labour "left" and their pseudo-left backers recognise that Corbyn is a much reduced and even discredited figure due to his record of retreat as Labour Party leader. Secondly, oppositional sentiment in the working class is far to the left of that which Corbyn successfully corralled and betrayed a decade ago.

Polling published last week by IPSOS showed 20 percent of British adults saying they would be "very" or "fairly likely" to consider voting for a new left-wing party. Among 16-34-year-olds this jumps to 33 percent. Sultana's recent statements to Novara Media and NLR that "the Labour Party is dead" chimes with this shift. She told Eagleton that leaving the party had "long been a matter of when, not if" and that she had chosen to quit "on a salient week, when the government decided to target disability benefits and to proscribe Palestine Action". Had she remained in the Labour Party too much longer, her political credibility would have been shattered.

Sultana's interview was a political warning to Corbyn's backers in the labour and trade union bureaucracy. Amid mounting hostility to Keir Starmer's Labour government and its authoritarian rampage against the working class, including austerity, attacks on immigrants and support for genocide, millions of workers and young people are seeking a political

alternative. They will not be satisfied with the tired pacifist and reformist formulas employed by Corbyn to oppose a genuine struggle against the ruling class and its political representatives.

Corbyn was elected Labour leader in 2015 under conditions of a leftward shift in the working class internationally following the global financial crisis of 2008. Left-populist parties pledging opposition to austerity were elected to power in Greece (Syriza) and Spain (Podemos). In Germany support for Die Linke (the Left Party) grew, likewise for Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise. In the United States Bernie Sanders called for a "political revolution against the billionaires" winning mass support before declaring his backing for Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden then Kamala Harris.

The betrayals by these left-populist and pseudo-left parties did not pass without consequence. Corbyn does not elicit the same popular enthusiasm he did a decade ago. The "historical gulf" separating 2015 from 2025—marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, NATO's war against Russia, Israel's genocide in Gaza, Trump's moves to establish a fascist dictatorship, the rise of far-right parties across Europe, and a Labour government launching a frontal assault on the working class—has profoundly changed political consciousness.

Sultana nevertheless calibrates her critique of Corbyn to prevent an open rift. Corbyn's period as party leader was, she says "in parts... a highly dysfunctional working environment with toxicity and bullying—not from Jeremy, but from some people around him. Power was too centralised. This is not what we need for this emerging project. We now have a younger generation that is highly politicised due to the establishment's disastrous policies on housing, education, employment and war. They are going to demand a seat at the table and the ability to wield actual power, and rightfully so."

She then decries unnamed senior forces in the new party, who "have engaged in anonymous briefings, making hostile and implicitly Islamophobic comments about me to the *Sunday Times* and *Sky News*". They were "using the Murdoch press to broadcast smears... the very same media class who tried to destroy Jeremy's reputation and the politics he represents." And were "cross[ing] class lines for the sake of factionalism and psychodrama", guilty of "bullying and intimidation". She concluded, "I'm not going to let it sabotage a project that's much bigger than all of us. We have fascism growling at the door; egos have no place in this fight."

Corbyn has replied angrily to Sultana's broadside in a filmed interview with *Middle East Eye* (MEE), "I think it wasn't really necessary for her to bring all that up in the interview, but that's what she decided to do." Defending his failure to oppose the IHRA definition (equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism) adopted by Labour in 2018, Corbyn told MEE he was under "considerable pressure" to do so, including from his

“closest supporters” on the party’s National Executive Committee. He claimed, “Personally, I was more in favour of the Jerusalem Declaration”, although he could not have been, because it was not published until 2021.

Zarah Sultana’s “vision”

Many workers and youth will have welcomed Sultana’s declaration that she is “proudly” anti-Zionist and her rejection of “capitulation” before the “class enemy”. But they should demand to know what programme she is advancing for the new party to ensure such betrayals are not repeated.

As set out in her interview with *NLR*, her “vision” for the party is a variant of the reformist half-measures championed by Corbyn and her only proposal to prevent another political rout is to put the right people (such as herself) in place to ensure “institutional resilience”.

“What are our long-term goals?”, she asks, before replying vaguely: “More time with our loved ones, more green space, universal childcare, free public transport, not worrying about bills.” In answer to the question, “[H]ow are we going to pay for this? Well, we can put an end to massive military overspending; we can tax the oil and gas companies; we can reverse the redistribution of wealth from the public to the private sector that has accelerated since Covid. We should pledge to fund free public transport instead of funding forever wars. These are policies that make sense to people. We need to argue for them as aggressively as the right argues for theirs.”

In the end all that Sultana is advocating is a reformist Labour Party Mark II, dressed up with greater community engagement, “a campaigning, social-movement orientation combined with a robust parliamentary presence: a situation where our MPs are on the frontlines of strike actions and anti-fascist mobilisations... It’s that kind of community power that sustains socialist politicians and holds them to account.”

It is necessary to recall that Corbyn’s more timid proposals in 2015-19 provoked a campaign of state interference aimed at removing him from office. Unnamed generals threatened a military coup should Corbyn become prime minister. In June 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that the Trump administration would not allow a Corbyn Labour government to take office and would “push back” to prevent this. This was their reaction *despite* Corbyn’s constant capitulations. How will the ruling class respond to a new left party pledged to reverse military spending, to oppose Zionism and to increase corporate taxes on the oil and gas sector?

Sultana offers nothing to combat such an offensive because that would demand the mass mobilisation of the working class against the capitalist state, not “institutional resilience” within the reformist parliamentary party she advocates.

She cites as a model of “socialist politicians” the Socialist Campaign Group (SCG) of MPs in the Labour Party. She describes these lifelong defenders of capitalism in glowing terms: “when you’re the kind of politician like Jeremy or John McDonnell or Diane Abbott, whose authority is deeply rooted in community struggles, you have a very distinct profile, and you can make much more meaningful gains.” Sultana served as Chairperson of the SCG from May 2020 to February 2025.

McDonnell, Shadow Chancellor under Corbyn, led a City of London “charm offensive” during those years pledging a “stable programme for investment” and declaring “Jeremy Corbyn and I are the stabilisers of capitalism.” He is determined to stay in Starmer’s party at all costs, despite his ongoing suspension. Sultana’s other hero, Abbott, also suspended, told the Edinburgh International Book Festival last week that she had “told” Corbyn not to set up a new party. Abbott confirmed she would not leave Labour, adding with considerable understatement that

“People are a tiny bit disappointed about the way we’ve gone in the past year.”

Sultana’s vision is of a capitalist party with a veneer of “socialist” rhetoric. She told Eagleton, “Think of Zohran Mamdani in New York; even many of us here in Britain know what his main pledges are. He has expressed them so that everyone can understand them, and they resonate on a level far deeper than most political discourse.”

Mamdani identifies as a “democratic socialist” and swept to victory in the Democratic Party primaries for New York’s mayoral race, winning mass support for his denunciation of the Gaza genocide and his reformist proposals to deal with soaring housing costs, childcare, and other social problems. Yet he has spent the weeks following his victory wooing Wall Street and working with the Democratic Party establishment to withdraw his calls to “globalise the Intifada” and to repudiate his attacks on the billionaires.

Mamdani’s popularity, like the new party initiative in Britain, speaks to a leftward shift in the working class, but as the WSWS explained: “Socialism is not a campaign slogan or series of reformist proposals. Even the limited social reforms advanced by Mamdani cannot be achieved without a frontal assault on the wealth and power of the capitalist ruling class. The ruling class is turning toward fascism, dictatorship and world war. Its power over society can only be broken through the expropriation of its wealth and the transformation of the gigantic corporations upon which this wealth is based into publicly owned utilities.”

A decade ago, the Socialist Equality Party wrote that those hoping Corbyn’s election as Labour leader would “provide an alternative to austerity will be cruelly disappointed. The real measure of his campaign must be judged not on stated intentions, but on the essential criterion of the class interests served by the party and the programme he defends. Labour is a right-wing bourgeois party. It is complicit in all the crimes of British imperialism and has functioned as the principal political opponent of socialism for more than a century ...” [*What does the “Jeremy Corbyn phenomenon” represent?* (August 15, 2015)]

The Corbyn project, aimed at transforming the Labour Party into a vehicle for “21st century socialism”, was an abject failure. Opposing any fight to mobilise the working class against his Blairite opponents and capitulating to them at every turn, “Corbynism” paved the way for Starmer. But the victory of the Blairites and Labour’s transformation into a ruthless instrument of the corporate and financial oligarchy are the product of fundamental changes in the structure of world capitalism. The globalisation of capitalist production has shattered the programme of national economic reform, transforming social-democratic parties and trade unions in every country into direct arms of the state, enforcing global competitiveness and stamping out all resistance to imperialism’s drive for war and global conquest.

A party based on a false perspective, whoever leads it, will not provide a way forward for the working class. It is based on a discussion of history, programme and perspective, and not the competing claims to leadership of Corbyn and Sultana, that workers and young people must determine their attitude to the building of a new political leadership.



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