

Britain's Labour Party leader Ed Miliband fuels anti-immigrant prejudice

By Paul Mitchell
27 June 2012

Last week Labour Party leader Ed Miliband played the anti-immigrant card, promising new measures to prevent British people being “locked out” of jobs by foreign workers. His speech followed one earlier this month calling for “a positive, outward-looking version of English identity”.

Miliband claimed that Labour had to change its policies to reflect “legitimate fears.” His appeal to anti-immigrant prejudice was couched in terms of ending exploitation and upholding workers’ rights. He pledged to reform a “nasty, brutish and short-term” labour market that uses too many low-paid immigrants and “to look at what incentives we can give companies so they do not rely on a pool of short-term temporary labour.”

The Labour leader reinforced every lie and myth ever invented that blames people from other countries for the desperate plight of millions of working people in Britain. He covered over for those who are really responsible—the financial oligarchy that has systematically defrauded the country of billions of pounds.

The last Labour government had got immigration policy wrong, he said, singling out its failure to impose curbs in 2004 on workers from new European Union member states. “We severely underestimated the number of people who would come here”, he said. “We were dazzled by globalisation and too sanguine about its price.”

Labour would impose maximum immigration controls for seven years on future EU accession countries.

Companies employing more than 25 percent foreign workers would now have to inform job centres. This will mean any job first being advertised for British workers for 28 days—a prospect that prompted Conservative immigration minister Damian Green to comment that it sounded “eerily reminiscent of British jobs for British workers”.

He would also “review” immigrants’ entitlement to benefits and “local connection” rules for council house

waiting lists. “This is only the start”, a party official declared. “We will also look at the services to which migrants are entitled such as social housing, schools and the National Health Service.”

Miliband’s speech, as could be anticipated, elicited virtually no opposition from within Labour’s ranks. Shadow Public Health minister Diane Abbott did not protest his comments, but only the way they “were spun by the leadership”. The putative leader of the party’s dwindling band of “lefts”, MP John McDonnell, admonished the Labour leader for adopting “the wrong approach”, saying the way to tackle the problem of low wages was to boost union rights—ignoring the fact that the unions have agreed to wage cuts, job losses and dismantling of the public sector.

The facts show that the vast majority of immigrants coming to the UK are students paying to study, or skilled workers. About 47,000 spouses, partners and dependents are admitted—but only after they have jumped through numerous hoops to prove their relationship. The number of asylum-seekers and refugees is small—around 20,000—and they are unable to claim anything. Less than 2 percent of the 10 million people who live in social housing are new migrants.

Research from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research has shown migration from within Europe has had little impact on jobs or wages for British workers: “The new migrants get jobs, contribute to the economy, pay taxes, don’t use many public services, and don’t take jobs from natives.”

Last year, Labour’s “largest ever listening exercise ... designed to reconnect Labour and the public” revealed that the “vast majority” of those interviewed criticised bankers’ bonuses and were worried about their children’s future. None of this has found its way into Labour’s policy review. Instead Labour has instigated a predetermined shift to the right, claiming that the

“public” wanted stringent law-and-order measures, cuts in welfare and a curb on immigration.

Miliband’s speech is a distillation of the anti-immigrant nostrums of the “Blue Labour” group, launched in 2009 by the academic Maurice Glasman. It calls for the dismantling of social provision, utilising nationalism, anti-immigrant measures and a more corporatist relationship with the trade unions.

Glasman reserves his most bitter attacks for the “state-driven, redistribution-driven, equality-driven Labour tradition that comes straight out of 1945”—the one period in history in which Labour was forced to make inroads against the major corporations and introduce welfare reforms that ensured it broad working class support for a considerable period of time.

Where New Labour went wrong for Glasman was its support for “globalisation”, which led to an “influx of immigrants”—creating resentment amongst the “white working class” that was compounded by the policies of “multiculturalism”. Blue Labour, he said, intended to remedy this with the promotion of “faith, flag and family”.

The attack on “statism” serves to justify the policies of austerity, including the privatisation of what remains of the public sector. With its emphasis on friendly societies and “localism”, Blue Labour dresses up the Conservatives’ “Big Society” plans to dismantle health care, education and other essential social provisions as an exercise in listening to the “white working class”. Indeed, it is difficult to find any reference to the working class by a top Labourite that is not prefixed by “white”.

Miliband is an enthusiastic supporter of Glasman’s ideas, declaring, “I think that actually [it’s] ahead of its time in a way. Blue Labour was saying to us, you have to think about the values that your society operates under—it’s not just always about how can you get a bit more money for the health service, or getting more money into education, it’s also something bigger.”

Miliband made “re-connecting” with party supporters on immigration a central theme of his campaign to become leader of the party in 2010. Last month, he appointed the MP most closely identified with Blue Labour, Jon Cruddas, to the top position as his Policy Review Co-Ordinator. “Jon Cruddas is already known as one of the most radical and deepest thinkers in the party”, Miliband said.

Cruddas was Tony Blair’s deputy political secretary from 1997 until 2001, when he became MP for Dagenham. Labour’s loss of support and the electoral

challenge of the British National Party in his own constituency saw him proclaim the need to win over the BNP’s constituency by essentially mirroring its policies—without the naked racism.

The welfare state’s “preoccupation with the most vulnerable”, including immigrants, had marginalised the “white working class”, he said. The party’s re-invigoration required it to reconnect with the “white working class” by adopting an “inclusive nationalism”.

Cruddas’s premise that the fascists were in tune with what working people thought ignored the views of millions of former Labour voters who were bitterly hostile to the BNP. Instead, the prejudices of a minority that have been systematically cultivated by all the major parties and the mass media were made the touchstone for the development of policy. He refused to make the slightest criticism of Labour’s pro-business agenda, the vast growth of social inequality under successive governments or the situation where millions were forced to compete against one another for ever dwindling resources such as council housing, schools and health services.

The effort to create a supposedly respectable nationalist, anti-immigrant party indicates an acute awareness of the social and political chasm that has opened up between the super-rich elite and the vast majority of the working population. Throughout Europe, the political class is seeking to fill this vacuum with right-wing populism to channel a social discontent in a xenophobic direction. That Labour is being advanced for this role is proof of the irreversibility of its rightward, pro-corporate trajectory despite its nauseating pose of “reconnecting with the working class”.

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