

UK Labour leader Corbyn's "cordial" meeting with China's President Xi

By Robert Stevens and Chris Marsden
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Following concerted efforts by his advisers, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was granted an unprecedented private meeting with China's President Xi Jinping during last week's state visit to the UK.

If one were to believe initial media coverage, the meeting should have been a stormy affair. For days, Corbyn's team indicated that he was not prepared to go along with the official policy of silence on issues relating to human rights in China and the impact of cheap Chinese steel imports on the UK steel industry.

His stance was held up as further proof that he is guided by principled considerations, as opposed to his Conservative opponents who were prepared to remain silent in order to secure the free flow of Chinese investment into the UK. He was "always concerned that the government doesn't raise human rights issues," his spokesman maintained. There were even veiled threats reported in the media that Corbyn would raise these issues at the state banquet, hosted by the queen, to be held in Xi's honour.

Corbyn was duly granted a 30-minute private talk with Xi, held in the 1844 Room of Buckingham Palace. But in the event, the meeting was described by a Labour spokesman as "cordial and constructive."

No details of the talks have emerged, but they supposedly covered human rights, world security and terrorism, China's links with the UK, the struggle against fascism in World War II, changes to the Labour Party and the Chinese Communist Party, China's New Silk Road infrastructure strategy and climate change—a truly breath-taking range of topics for a 30-minute discussion.

Corbyn and his shadow chancellor John McDonnell had both insisted that Prime Minister David Cameron raise with Xi the crisis of the UK steel industry, but in the end whatever Corbyn himself had to say was

delivered to Xi in the form of a private letter whose contents have not even been hinted at.

After this embarrassing display, Corbyn attended the banquet in white tie and full evening dress and shook hands with the queen for the first time.

Prior to Corbyn's meeting with Xi, Liam Young, writing in the *Independent*, hailed the fact that "finally, a leading British political figure is going to challenge the Chinese on their atrocious human rights record. Jeremy has already achieved victory through his principled position on Saudi Arabia ..."

Young was referring to Corbyn's first Labour conference speech as leader, during which he drew attention to the case of Ali Mohammed Baqir al-Nimr, who faces beheading and crucifixion for criticising the Saudi monarchy. Due to public outcry, the government was forced to withdraw UK firms from talks over a £5.9 million contract to provide services to Saudi jails.

However, in the case of China, Corbyn is not dealing with a contract worth a few million, but trade and investment amounting to tens if not hundreds of billions. And in these circumstances, he chose to exercise the necessary discretion.

Corbyn's actions flow from the bourgeois character of his politics.

Xi's China is a brutal regime, but for Corbyn to focus solely or even primarily on the human rights abuses of Beijing is a betrayal of those workers and youth who elected him to oppose the attacks of the Tory government and to give voice to mass anti-austerity and anti-war sentiment.

Since becoming Labour leader, on every issue of significance, Corbyn has made his peace with the right wing and the policies that are still upheld by the party, including laying the basis for Labour to support British military involvement in Syria.

In addition, last month Cameron announced in parliament that he had authorised the extra-judicial drone killings of two British citizens in Syria. Corbyn said nothing in response—waiting two days before stating that he was “unclear of the point” of what had been done. Neither has he mounted any campaigns over the operations of the vast and unaccountable GCHQ spying network, which monitors the electronic communications of every man, woman and child in the UK, nor in defence of WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange.

Under these circumstances Corbyn’s selective and seemingly polite criticisms of the Chinese regime over human rights deserves only contempt.

The same holds true of his “secret diplomacy”-style complaint over Chinese steel imports. It is not China that is sacking thousands of steel workers in the UK, but Tata Steel, Sahairiya Steel Industries and Caparo. Corbyn only replicates the exclusive focus on allegations of steel dumping by China as the means by which the trade union bureaucracy seeks to maintain its alliance with the steel corporations in demanding subsidies and tax breaks from the Tories—rather than call for the necessary unified struggle by steel workers internationally.

Had Corbyn raised his criticisms of China in a more determined manner, he would still not have been speaking in the interests of the working class. He was speaking for an entirely different constituency—a rightward shifting layer of the upper middle class. Defending “human rights” has become a standard refrain among layers of petty bourgeois “liberals” and the pseudo-left groups that support Corbyn to justify their backing for military intervention by the major imperialist powers in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and now Syria.

Moreover, if Corbyn had publicly confronted Xi on human rights it would be to give a voice to those sections of the bourgeoisie who are concerned that the UK has gone too far in its courtship of China and now risks alienating its key ally in Washington. Indeed Cameron’s own former strategy adviser, Steve Hilton, told BBC “Newsnight” that the current policy is a “national humiliation. ... The truth is that China is a rogue state just as bad as Russia or Iran, and I just don’t understand why we’re sucking up to them rather than standing up to them as we should be.”

Britain’s US partners were bewildered by Cameron’s attitude, Hilton added.

The fact that he “disappointed” the expectations of some of his supporters proves the strength of the pro-Chinese lobby in ruling class circles and the fact that its gravitational pull has dragged not only Corbyn but many others from his milieu in its wake.

The most grotesque example of Corbyn’s fawning before Xi was when he gave fulsome praise for “the remarkable Chinese achievements in poverty reduction, lifting over 600 million people out of poverty.”

This line was provided by one of Corbyn’s key advisers, John Ross, the former head of the Pabloite International Marxist Group, now Socialist Action. Citing how China “has raised 728 million people from poverty,” Ross wrote of Corbyn’s meeting with Xi, “China should be supported precisely *because of its contribution to human rights*. China has done more to improve the overall situation not only of its own people but of humanity than any other country in the world—as the facts show” (emphasis in original).

The definition of poverty in China is a person living on less than \$1.25 a day. Anyone earning more than this has now, according to Corbyn, been “lifted” out of poverty.

His is an endorsement of conditions in which billions of super-exploited workers eke out an existence on rock bottom wages, with the highest statutory minimum hourly rate set at 17 yuan (£1.76)—conditions that earlier this month prompted Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt to insist that cuts in tax credits should be used to force British workers to work like the Chinese.

Corbyn has moved from a position of backbench posturing to leading a party that has long represented the interests of British imperialism on the world arena. As proved by his dealings with Xi, the price for this transition is the ditching of his old radical baggage—in the process recasting himself as a “responsible” politician who can be trusted to do and say only what is permitted by the ruling elite.

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