

UK Labour leader Corbyn silent on right-wing coup attempt at Sheffield rally

By Robert Stevens
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On Friday, UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn spoke at an open-air rally of up to 2,000 people in Sheffield. Called at short notice, the meeting is one of a number organised by his supporters in the run-up to September's leadership ballot.

The leadership contest was forced after 172 Labour MPs supported a vote of no-confidence in Corbyn. This followed a walkout by more than 60 MPs from the shadow cabinet, organised as part of a coup to remove Corbyn by the party's Blairite wing.

The Sheffield event was organised by the Momentum group, the Labour leader's network of supporters. Among those attending in Sheffield were Labour members and supporters and numerous campaign groups—from those opposing racism, fracking and police brutality to animal rights campaigners. Up to half of the audience comprised young people, including students.

The most striking feature of the rally was the fact that none of the speakers, including Corbyn himself, made any mention of the right-wing coup against him. Nor was there any condemnation of the anti-democratic methods being used to try to rig the outcome of the leadership contest, including the exclusion of some 130,000 members from voting and the suspension of Labour Party branches for the duration of the campaign. A purge of the membership, in order to root out up to 50,000 left-wing members, is also underway, as a result of which 1,000 new applicants to join per day are currently on hold.

Nonetheless, speakers declared that Labour was undergoing a revival, with local councillor Lewis Dagnall asserting that Corbyn and those who supported him had “transformed” the party so that it now offered a “clear alternative to those who are only in politics for the rich.” Time and again the call was made for party

unity, passing over the fact that the right-wing openly talk of a split if Corbyn wins the contest.

In putting himself forward as a leadership candidate last year, Corbyn's objective was to try and rescue Labour from complete electoral annihilation, as it had become reviled as a party of austerity and militarism.

Tosh McDonald, president of the train drivers' union ASLEF, described how his union executive had met following Labour's defeat in the May 2015 general election in a mood of utter despair. They were supposed to select their preference in the leadership contest that had opened up after leader Ed Miliband resigned.

Corbyn had not entered the race at that point, and McDonald explained that the executive “looked at the candidates and all they saw was more of the same. More of the same policies that had lost us five million votes between 1997 to 2010. That had lost us more than a 100-seat majority in parliament.”

For the first time in 12 years, the executive “adjourned the meeting without being able to nominate somebody.” He described the relief of the bureaucracy when Corbyn entered the race, and the ASLEF executive finally felt there was someone who could reverse Labour's decline.

His remarks were essentially a plea to the Labour right, although they were never referenced. “I wish I didn't have to be here,” McDonald said. “I wish the whole of the Labour Party, whether that be new members, old members, supporters, councillors, MPs, all stood together against the Tories... We should all be together, not disunited and fighting each other.”

John Dunn, a former National Union of Mineworker official, also spoke. He was one of the 92 miners beaten and arrested by police at the Orgreave coking plant in 1984 during the year-long strike.

Dunn said of the miners' struggle, "Those were the days. We were fighting for something. There was movement, an enthusiasm for what the labour movement was doing... But what happened? We were abandoned and defeated. We walked back to work after 12 months on strike in defeat... That hurt. We are not going to do it again."

Referring to Corbyn's leadership, he said, "Something new is happening. Those dark days have gone." He added, "After we re-elect Jeremy in a few weeks, we go forward... The real justice we get is when we abolish this rotten system that looks after the minority and replace it with a socialist society."

In his own speech, however, Corbyn did not use the word socialism. In fact, he was at pains to stress that his policies were entirely reasonable.

No attempt was made to alert his audience to the dangers posed by the right-wing, whose coup has support at the highest level of the state and intelligence apparatus in the UK and United States.

Several times the Labour leader referenced the fact that the rally had been organised as part of the leadership contest, but he said nothing about the contest itself and made no mention of his opponent, Owen Smith. The campaign was "about the leadership of the party but it is also about how we do our politics, change society and how we bring people together," he said.

Corbyn specialises in amorphous generalities. He describes various iniquities in society including low pay and cuts in education and health care but never mentions that these are a product of the crisis-ridden capitalist system. "Austerity," Corbyn stated, "is a political choice, not an economic necessity."

The central thrust of his speech was that all the ills in society can be cured if only people come together and decide on a different course of action. The way forward, he argued, was through the creation of a national investment bank to pay for infrastructure projects, greater investment in manufacturing, sustainable jobs and a council house building programme.

This would start "the process of community investment for the good of all of us," he claimed, as it was the "function of government to reach out to everybody in our society." This was hardly "extremist, Marxist, left stuff," he said.

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