

Britain: Labour's National Executive extends purge of party membership

By Robert Stevens
27 August 2016

The Labour Party's right wing escalated its purge of the party Thursday with the announcement that Ronnie Draper, the general secretary of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU), had been suspended from membership.

Draper, a party member for 40 years, was suspended by Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC). In a statement Friday, Draper said he had not been informed of the basis for his suspension. All he had been told "is that this is something to do with an unidentified tweet I have posted. I have not been given the opportunity to refute any allegations, or a date for any hearing." He is now "blocked from attending Labour party meetings, annual conference and, above all, voting in the leadership election."

While it is not yet established why Draper—the leader of the 20,000 strong union—was suspended, he is a prominent supporter of the pseudo-left Socialist Party-led National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN).

Draper's suspension proves that the right-wing opponents of Jeremy Corbyn will stop at nothing to try and prevent his re-election as Labour leader on September 24. The NEC has already won legal backing for its decision to bar 130,000 members—many thought to be Corbyn supporters—from taking part in the election.

Overseeing the witch-hunt is the party's Compliance Unit, which is working through applications to check whether 180,000 new registered supporters who signed up to take part in the vote are eligible, or include members of, or public advocates for, other groups.

It was reported earlier this month that some 40,000 of the 180,000 applicants who joined in a two-day window in July, after being forced to pay £25 to do so, have already been barred from voting. They are accused of committing "crimes"—defined as previous

support for a rival political party candidate, publicly advocating support for other political parties and groups, absence from the electoral register or because their payments supposedly bounced.

Another 10,000 cases are currently before the NEC's Oversight Panel, where they are being assessed as to whether they are in compliance with the party's "aims and values." In order to enforce this, a massive trawl of Labour members' social media accounts is on-going, as revealed in the case of Draper.

The Compliance Unit is Labour's version of Orwell's Thought Police. It originated in earlier purges of the party, carried out by Neil Kinnock in the 1980s.

So extensive, however, is the current purge that Saving Labour, a network formed by the Blairites as part of the coup, issued projections this week that leadership challenger Owen Smith could narrowly defeat Corbyn. Saving Labour compiled the study among the 647,000 members who are eligible to vote, including those who joined before and after the 2015 general election, new registered supporters, and trade union and other affiliates.

Commenting on Draper's suspension, John McDonnell, Corbyn's shadow chancellor and closest ally, noted that Labour peer Lord Sainsbury, who has given more than £2 million to support the Liberal Democrats, has not been suspended. Nor has any action been taken against Michael Foster, the Labour Party donor who called Corbyn and his staff "Nazi storm troopers."

"Labour party members will not accept what appears to be a rigged purge of Jeremy Corbyn supporters," McDonnell said. But neither McDonnell nor Corbyn has presented any means by which the tens of thousands of party members who are being disenfranchised can oppose this blatant ballot rigging.

McDonnell proposed only writing to party general secretary and arch-coup plotter, Iain McNicol, to demand members are informed of the reasons for their suspension and be given time to challenge the decision.

Corbyn appeared for the fifth hustings between himself and Smith in Glasgow just hours after Draper's suspension had been announced. But he made no mention of it during the debate, nor commented at all on the putsch.

Again, he made a number of retreats on his stated left-wing objectives. Asked whether the UK should remain a member of NATO, Corbyn said he supported the Western imperialist alliance "as far as it can be a force for peace and good in the world." Without mentioning the massive build-up of NATO military forces along Russia's western border, he called only for a "de-escalation of tensions between NATO and Russia" and said he was opposed to human rights abuses "in NATO supporting countries or in Russia itself."

In response to a question as to whether he was in favour of a referendum on ending the monarchy, he replied, "I wouldn't make it a priority in an election campaign," adding vaguely that he supported "much greater democracy in Britain" and replacing "the House of Lords with an elected upper chamber."

Corbyn repeated his opposition to a split in the Labour Party stating, "After this election, the Parliamentary Labour Party I hope will recognise the result of this election, and recognise that when we come together as a movement, as members, MPs, we can take on and defeat the Tories."

His efforts to placate the right were to no avail. Smith made clear in his own remarks that the key element in the timing of the right-wing putsch is the shock Leave vote in June's referendum on UK membership of the European Union (EU).

In alliance with the highest echelons of the state and military-intelligence apparatus in the UK and the US, sections of the ruling elite are seeking to refashion Labour as a political vehicle for overturning the result of the referendum.

With parliament resuming shortly, new Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May is facing increasing pressure from the anti-EU wing of her party to enact Article 50, the clause that officially begins the process

of a UK withdrawal from the EU.

Smith has made the issue of Brexit, and his preparedness to do everything he can to prevent it, the central dividing line in the leadership contest.

Asked how he would call on Labour MPs to vote if triggering Article 50 was put to a vote in parliament—as some are demanding as a means of preventing it—Corbyn said, "We have to recognise there has been a referendum that didn't give us the result that we wanted."

But he refused to state explicitly whether he would oppose Article 50 being triggered, instead answering that lines should be "set down" in negotiations over Britain's withdrawal—such as ensuring the protection of workers' rights and that Britain's industries and financial services had continued access to European markets.

Smith responded that this was not "good enough" and "it is wrong for Britain to be outside the European Union. We should be in it."

Repeating the charge of the coup plotters that Corbyn had "sabotaged" the pro-EU campaign, Smith seemed to read from a series of prompt notes attacking Corbyn as a long-time opponent of the EU, who had only recently made a pretence "Damascene conversion" to supporting the Remain campaign.

He baited Corbyn repeatedly, accusing the Labour leader of lying as to whether he had even voted personally for Remain. "I'm not even sure that Jeremy did vote 'in' in the EU referendum," Smith said.

If he became leader, Smith said, Labour's next general election manifesto would include a pledge to stay in the EU and he attacked Corbyn for not committing to the same.

"I will use absolutely every vehicle possible in order to do that, including voting in Parliament not to trigger Article 50. If I were leader of the Labour Party, we would vote to block Article 50," Smith asserted. "Under my leadership we would be strong and we would be staying in the European Union."

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>