

Blairite coup to continue despite UK Labour leadership vote outcome

By Julie Hyland
23 September 2016

Balloting in the Labour Party leadership contest closed Wednesday. The victor will be announced at Labour's special conference tomorrow.

Jeremy Corbyn is expected to win comfortably against his challenger, Owen Smith. This is despite the vicious campaign, initiated by the Blairite right wing, to depose the Labour leader.

The vote in favour of the UK quitting the European Union in June was the trigger for the long-planned coup. There followed a wave of resignations from the shadow cabinet and a no-confidence motion signed by 172 members of the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) in an attempt to force Corbyn to resign. When that was unsuccessful, the right wing barred 130,000 members from voting under a spurious time rule. Just how much of an impact this will have on the size of Corbyn's expected majority—he won with 59.5 percent last year—is unclear.

The failure of the attempted putsch necessitated a meeting of the National Executive Committee on Tuesday. Presented as an attempt to agree a "truce" and unify the party, the proposals—drawn up by the PLP—show that the right wing are preparing a war of attrition until their aims are realised.

Deputy Labour leader Tom Watson, a key player in the coup, proposed a return to the electoral college system—abolished in 2011 under Ed Miliband—whereby members of the shadow cabinet are elected by the PLP. He claimed this would enable Labour to "put the band back together" in time for a possible early election. In reality, it would guarantee a Blairite majority on the shadow cabinet.

Watson also proposed that party leadership voting rules be reversed, with the decision being made one-third by the PLP, a third by the unions and the remaining third by party members. This would exclude registered supporters who pay a one-off fee to vote, 84 percent of whom backed Corbyn last September. That is why the right wing hiked the fee up from £3 to £25 in the latest contest. Nonetheless, almost 130,000 people successfully signed up.

Watson's efforts to secure agreement on the proposals before the conference were defeated by 16 to 15, with

Corbyn voting against. Nevertheless Corbyn has agreed to talks on the measures on Saturday evening and to report back to the NEC. As far as he is concerned, "the slate will be wiped clean this weekend," he said.

Details of the additional 22 changes to party rules agreed by the NEC are sketchy, but they include expanding the NEC to include representatives from the Scottish and Welsh Labour parties. These will be nominated by the Scottish and Welsh Labour leaders—Kezia Dugdale and Carwyn Jones—both Corbyn opponents.

Several Corbyn supporters successfully won elections to the NEC last month and, effective from October, this would have overturned the right-wing majority on the NEC. The inclusion of Scottish and Welsh representatives will enable the right wing to regain the initiative.

All members are to be required to sign a pledge "to act within the spirit and rules of the Labour party in my conduct both on and offline, with members and non-members." Failure to do so will result in disciplinary action. This will be used to legitimise the draconian methods used to bar anyone suspected of left-wing sympathies from party membership.

Using overwhelmingly trumped-up charges of anti-Semitism, misogyny and intimidation, 3,107 people have been suspended from membership as Labour's Orwellian Compliance Unit has trawled through Internet postings to target anyone critical of the Blairites.

Stoke-on-Trent Labour MP Ruth Smeeth welcomed the move. Smeeth, who is Jewish, has been at the centre of the witch-hunt alleging rampant anti-Semitism in the Labour Party. She announced she would be taking a "minder" with her as a "security precaution" to the special conference.

Smeeth cited as proof of the unwarranted abusive messages she received, those denouncing her as a "CIA/MI5/Mossad informant". But the lady doth protest too much. Smeeth, one of the 60 plus anti-Corbyn resignations from the shadow cabinet, formerly held a post with the lobby group, Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM). In 2009, WikiLeaks released a US

embassy diplomatic cable identifying her as a “strictly protect” US informant. She is married to Michael Smeeth, a member of the executive of the British-American Project (BAP)—an outpost of the US/UK military intelligence apparatus that grooms political figures.

The coup has not ended, only moved to a different stage. Several MPs have already said they intend to form an alternative shadow cabinet on the backbenches if Corbyn is returned, while former Home Secretary Alan Johnson urged a relentless campaign to undermine Corbyn’s leadership “year after year.”

Others, such as former party leader Neil Kinnock, have made no secret of their satisfaction that the party crisis will hit Labour at the polls, which will in turn be used to justify further moves against Corbyn. On Tuesday, the Liberal Democrats gained a seat on Cardiff council from Labour, following a Liberal Democrat gain at Labour’s expense earlier this month in the Mosborough ward of Sheffield. In Bristol, the suspension of three pro-Corbyn councillors by the NEC has seen Labour lose overall control of the local authority.

Writing in the *Telegraph*, John McTernan, former political adviser to Tony Blair, set out the right wing’s strategy. Significantly, he pinned his hopes for overturning Corbyn’s stated opposition to austerity and war on the trade unions.

McTernan derided Corbyn as a “pacifist on [Britain’s nuclear weapons programme] Trident, soft on [Russian President Vladimir] Putin, opposed to business, growth and wealth, committed to tax and spend.”

“The affiliated trade unions are central to how the next year unfolds for Labour,” he wrote, arguing that the trade unions would veto Corbyn’s opposition to renewing Trident.

“Central to Labour’s recovery as a viable political party in Britain is back to the future,” he continued. Labour’s great successes were achieved in its early days, before 1918, when it consisted solely of “affiliated unions and the PLP.” The rot had set in when it decided to open the door to individual members “who had to be brought back in line by the unions. That was what happened in the 1980s [at the time of the witch-hunt against the Militant tendency] and it will be necessary again.”

McTernan noted that this is why Blair had protected the role of the unions in party policy making. “The moves that are most likely to succeed in isolating Corbyn are ones which involve the trade unions,” he stressed—hence the proposed return to the electoral college system.

“It is important to remember that Labour is not now and has never been a socialist party... The virus of socialism is alien to the Labour Party—it is killing the party now, but the cure will be, as always, the unions,” he wrote.

It should be recalled that it was the trade unions that forced the resignation of George Lansbury, Labour leader between 1932 and 1935. A Christian pacifist, it was under his office that the 1933 Labour conference supported unilateral disarmament and pledged not to participate in any wars. For this he was denounced by the Trades Union Congress, which used its weight to overturn the policy in 1935—with Transport and General Workers’ Union leader, Ernest Bevin, leading the attack. Bevin went on to become Minister of Labour in the wartime national unity government—1940-1945—and a prime mover in the creation of NATO as a military alliance against the Soviet Union after the war.

Today, the world again stands on the brink of a military catastrophe—this time fought with nuclear weapons. Britain is playing an active role in US military provocations against Russia, including participating in last weekend’s deliberate bombing of the Syrian army near Deir ez-Zor.

McTernan’s comments give added importance to events at last week’s TUC conference. Corbyn was not invited to address the gathering, while TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady made no mention of the crisis in the Labour Party in her opening remarks.

The TUC is split over the Corbyn leadership, with the Unite union, led by Len McCluskey, acting as the Labour leader’s key supporter. But McTernan noted that McCluskey is up for election next year. Given the centrality of Unite’s role in the defence industry, he suggested, this could change.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>