

UK Labour Party conference: Corbyn again prostrate before right wing

By Chris Marsden
28 September 2016

Jeremy Corbyn will deliver his closing speech to the annual UK Labour Party conference today.

There will no doubt be appeals to restore party unity following the leadership contest provoked by the party's right wing in an attempt to remove him. Corbyn can be expected to plead for Labour MPs to accept the democratic mandate he secured Saturday by substantially increasing his margin of victory over the already decisive majority he won in last September's leadership contest. There will also be a call for the party to prepare to take on the Conservatives in the face of a possible early election.

Corbyn's speech will crown a conference in which he has repudiated the mandate he received from over 300,000 members and supporters—that is, to take on and defeat the political heirs of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown and honour his commitment to oppose austerity, militarism and war.

Corbyn called for party unity Saturday as he accepted the applause of a conference audience notable for the absence of many of the 172 MPs whose vote of no confidence against him led to the latest leadership contest. But the very next day, the counter-offensive of his opponents began.

The anti-Corbyn Labour First campaign held a fringe meeting at which Angela Eagle, a failed leadership candidate, accused Corbyn of laying the basis for “populist authoritarian rule,” while MPs such as Hilary Benn, Yvette Cooper, Vernon Coaker and Ruth Smeeth vowed to continue opposing his leadership.

At a Fabian Society fringe meeting, a potential future challenger for leadership, Chuka Umunna, centred his fire on Corbyn's refusal to recognise “legitimate concerns” over immigration and his opposition to war. “I don't think anyone in the Labour movement should underestimate the importance of us illustrating that we are as patriotic as anyone else,” he said.

The Blairites have little support in the party

membership, but still control the party apparatus that Corbyn is so desperately intent on “improving.” As a result, the right wing on Tuesday regained control of the National Executive Committee, overturning the majority briefly secured by Corbyn's backers in elections held only weeks ago. They used the simple expediency of demanding representation for Scottish and Welsh Labour. Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale and Welsh First Minister Carwyn Jones are bitterly hostile to Corbyn.

Ultimately, the right wing continues to dictate events not through such manoeuvres, but because of Corbyn's own politics.

Corbyn wants to preserve the unity of the Labour Party because he represents only a left-talking faction of the apparatus. He stated at the very beginning of his first leadership bid that he wanted only to prevent what he termed the “PASOKification” of the party—a reference to the collapse of the Greek social democrats as a result of their record of imposing austerity.

To this end, he urged Labour to make a feint to the left so that it could reestablish some support among its former electorate in the working class, while stressing at all times his loyalty to the party. To his chagrin, whereas his appeal won significant popular support among layers of workers and young people, it was treated as political treason by the MPs he was so anxious to convince.

Corbyn's response is by now well established. He has retreated again and again from the very positions for which he was elected to fight in his uniformly unsuccessful efforts to appease his critics.

The most degrading example of this at conference was the speech delivered by Corbyn's newly appointed shadow defence secretary, Clive Lewis. The speech was designed to appease the right by continuing to reference Corbyn's own opposition to the renewal of the Trident nuclear submarine programme while accepting that the party's position was supportive of the programme. The

speech as delivered therefore stated, “As you know, I [Lewis] am sceptical about Trident renewal, as are many here. But I am clear that our Party has a policy for Trident renewal.”

It was quickly leaked that Lewis had wanted to go further by adding, “I wouldn’t seek to change it.” However, the sentence was removed at the last minute—a fact made public by Lewis’s sulking on the platform and reports that he was so angry he “punched a wall.”

Lewis also made a pointed defence of the NATO military alliance as supposedly embodying Labour’s values of “collectivism, internationalism and the strong defending the weak.” This was the same line spouted last December by the Blairite right wing, led by then-Shadow Foreign Secretary Hilary Benn, when Corbyn allowed the Blairites a free vote on bombing Syria.

“Every Labour government since Attlee’s (1945-1951) has met NATO’s spending target of at least 2 percent of GDP every single year. And I confirm today that the next Labour government will do the same, including our UN and peacekeeping obligations,” Lewis added.

Corbyn responded by denying the existence of any tensions, claiming that he had given Lewis a “bear hug” after he came off stage. In contrast, Lewis reassured MPs, “I won’t be coming back to conference between now and the next election to try to undo the policy we have on Trident as things stand.”

Lewis is an infantry officer graduate from Sandhurst Military Academy who served in Afghanistan and pointedly abstained on the vote for the renewal of Trident. As reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*, *Guardian* columnist Owen Jones admitted that he and Lewis had discussed Lewis replacing Corbyn before the scheduled 2020 general election.

More fundamental than Corbyn’s constant appeasing of the right is the fact that his perspective, even had he the backbone to fight for it, offers no way forward for the working class. This was underscored by Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell’s speech to conference outlining the economic policy to be pursued by a Corbyn-led Labour government. He made clear that this was a programme centred on an attempt to revitalise the fortunes of British capitalism rather than one addressing the desperate plight facing workers and youth.

Aside from a headline call for a £10-an-hour minimum wage—a miserly £1 more than the Tory government’s minimum wage pledge by 2020—McDonnell began by pledging to defend Britain’s financial services industry in negotiations over Brexit. He outlined only measures to

tackle tax avoidance and evasion, rather than any increase in taxes on business.

His key policy initiative was the creation of a £250 billion investment programme run by a National Investment Bank that will provide money for “small businesses,” “cooperatives,” “business hubs across the country,” etc. This policy is directed to the upper layers of the middle class, not the working class.

McDonnell declared, “We’ll help create 200 local energy companies and 1,000 energy cooperatives,” while workers were offered only a “Right to Own” policy that amounts to “first refusal” on buying their company when they face “a change of ownership or closure.”

More generally, under the slogan “Good business needs good government,” McDonnell pledged protectionist measures to safeguard British manufacturing as part of what he called “an entrepreneurial state that works with the wealth creators, the workers and the entrepreneurs.”

Imagine the society that we can create,” he concluded. “In this party you no longer have to whisper it, it’s called socialism.”

Whatever this witches’ brew might be called, socialism it is not. The central political role played by Corbyn is to hold up a hodgepodge of minimal reforms, pacifist phrases and the forlorn hope of a renewed and remodelled Labour Party as an alternative to the struggle for socialism that the working class must now urgently undertake.

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