

UK: Jeremy Corbyn re-launched as populist leader

By Robert Stevens
4 January 2017

In his New Year message, UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn presented himself as an anti-establishment figure leading a party committed to taking on corporate interests to “stand up for people.”

Following the electoral wipe-out of Labour in the 2015 general election, after it campaigned on a programme of continued austerity, Corbyn was elected party leader by a landslide. He won with the backing of hundreds of thousands of Labour members and supporters after standing as the nominal “left” candidate opposing both austerity and war. Following an attempted coup against him last summer, he was re-elected in last September by an even bigger margin of victory.

Corbyn’s New Year message confirmed once again that he has no intention of honouring his campaign pledges. Rather he continues to loyally serve as frontman for a party that is still dedicated to waging war on the working class and war against the opponents of British imperialism throughout the world.

The Labour leader drew attention to worsening social inequality in Britain. Elderly people are not “receiving the care at home they deserve,” which was “putting huge strain on them and their family.” People were waiting longer in accident and emergency units “or on trolleys because our National Health Service and social care system is at breaking point...” This Christmas, he added, “120,000 children didn’t have a home to call their own.”

There was “massive insecurity at work too,” with millions of people” unable to plan their lives “because whether on temporary or zero hours contracts they don’t know what job or what hours they’ll have from day to day, week to week or month to month. And for many, pay is so low that it doesn’t make ends meet.”

After delivering this litany, Corbyn declared, “I’ve

spent over 40 years in politics campaigning for a better way of doing things, standing up for people, taking on the establishment, and opposing decisions that would make us worse off.”

The reality is that for more than 30 of the 40 years he refers to, Corbyn sat on Labour’s backbenches as the party lurched sharply to the right—making his token protests while loyally defending Labour’s grip on the working class.

Today, as party leader, he can no longer hide his personal responsibility for what his party does behind a pose of individual opposition.

Corbyn speaks of “the political system letting down the people of this country; how decisions made in Westminster are making people’s lives harder,” without passing mention of the fact that his party and his MPs have been just as instrumental in making those decisions as the Conservative Party.

Austerity measures were initiated by the Labour government of Gordon Brown following the 2008 global financial crash. Brown bailed out the banks and super-rich to the tune of £1 trillion, a sum which is now being clawed back through the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions. Corbyn and his closest ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, even now insist that local Labour councils abide by the law and continue to impose massive spending cuts.

Corbyn continued by stressing that “Labour accepts and respects the result” of last June’s referendum vote to leave the European Union. “We won’t be blocking our leaving the European Union, but we won’t stand by” as a “Brexit that protects the bankers in the City and continues to give corporate handouts to the biggest companies is not good enough.”

This attempt to put a left spin on Labour’s pro-capitalist Brexit agenda will not wash. The central

demand of Corbyn over Brexit is that British capital retains access to the European Union's Single Market. Speaking in November Corbyn said, "We will be pressing for full access to the European single market as part of the Brexit negotiations." Labour would seek to amend any vote on Brexit in parliament on this basis. The emphasis placed by Corbyn on continued access to the Single Market reflects his desire to defend the strategic interests of the British ruling class.

An earlier message Corbyn sent over the holiday period serves to underscore his and Labour's pro-imperialist agenda. On December 22, the Forces TV website ran a video titled, "Jeremy Corbyn's Christmas Message To The Forces." Their web page noted that in his message "The Labour Party leader praised the sacrifices, courage and professionalism of serving personnel, home and abroad..."

Corbyn's support for Britain's military was wrapped in calls for veterans and their families to have proper access to housing, health care, and school places, but his central message was to support the ongoing operations of the military abroad. He told the Armed Forces, "We thank you for not only being prepared to defend the country, but also saving lives, like the valiant crew of HMS Enterprise, who bravely rescued more than 9,000 refugees and migrants, fleeing war and persecution for a better life."

Time after time Corbyn has capitulated in the face of Labour's pro-war right wing, granting a free vote in November 2015 in support of bombing raids on Syria and on the renewal of the Trident nuclear weapons programme. His "populist" turn takes this a step further—to the point where he now delivers eulogies to the "sacrifices, courage and professionalism" of the armed forces.

He never explained that the reason refugees are fleeing their homelands is as a consequence of the invasions and wars of the last 25 years, in which British imperialism, as the junior partner of the United States, has played a central role. For more than a year, the Royal Air Force has been escalating its military operations over the skies of Iraq and Syria under the guise of fighting "terrorism". In December, the *Telegraph* reported, "RAF jets busiest for 25 years as they 'pound' Isil [Islamic State] positions in Iraq and Syria."

The article continued, "A year after MPs voted to

expand Britain's military activity against Isil from Iraq to Syria, the Royal Air Force is operating at its most intense for 25 years, far outstripping UK involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan..."

The *Telegraph* reported that the RAF has also dropped 11 times more ordnance on Syria and Iraq in the past year—1,276 strikes—than during any year in the Afghanistan war.

Massive resources are being drained from society to finance these operations. In answer to a parliamentary question, the government stated in September that between November 2014 and the end of August 2016, there have been 473 Hellfire missiles used in Iraq and Syria, with the estimated cost of these missiles at £44.455 million.

Corbyn sends his best wishes to the MoD even as they prepare a massive escalation of militarist violence. On December 25, the *Telegraph* reported, "The RAF is preparing to mount a major offensive in Syria next year... Senior military sources said that from next Spring the RAF is likely to 'pivot' its focus from Iraq to Syria as it seeks to bolster rebel forces fighting Syria."

RAF jets have "mounted just 60 air strikes in Syria compared to 347 in Iraq," it adds. "Britain hopes that Mosul will be re-taken [from Islamic State] by Spring of next year, enabling RAF Typhoons, Tornados and Reaper drones to mount a fresh offensive in Syria."

This operation risks a direct confrontation with the military forces not only of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad but with his Russian backers who control Syria's airspace.

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