

The Labour Party's Annual Conference 2017

Corbyn prepares for government: At what price?

the Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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Many who followed this week's Labour Party annual conference will be marvelling at the apparent difference a year can make in politics.

In September 2016, Jeremy Corbyn had just seen off a second attempted coup to remove him as leader by the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP). These efforts to depose him were accompanied by legal challenges and the suspension and expulsion of many of his supporters. The Labour bureaucracy trawled social media accounts to uncover those deemed not to be genuine party supporters, in an operation codenamed "Operation Ice-pick".

Their campaign was backed by the media and leading military figures, who threatened mutiny if Corbyn was ever elected to office on his avowed anti-militarist and anti-austerity agenda.

Less than six months ago, leading Labour figures barely concealed their delight when Prime Minister Theresa May called a snap election to push her "hard Brexit" agenda—hoping to see their own party crushed electorally.

Instead, while May remains in office she heads a minority government. The Leave vote in the 2016 referendum on European Union (EU) membership called by the Tory party to resolve a right-wing faction fight within its ranks has deepened these divisions, while opening up an existential crisis for British capital.

Having managed to increase Labour's vote in the general election despite the PLP's efforts at sabotage, Corbyn concluded the conference by stating, "We have become a Government-in-waiting. ..."

Capitalism faces a "crisis of legitimacy," he said, insisting that Labour's programme was based on "socialism for the 21st century" and represented a "modern, progressive socialist party that has rediscovered its roots and its purpose, bucking the trend across Europe."

It was not only Corbyn's supporters in Momentum that cheered his remarks. Deputy leader Tom Watson, who played a key role in the previous coup attempts, cheered Corbyn to the rafters, attempting to lead chants in support of a leader he had worked so hard to depose. All Corbyn's former critics are now

seemingly on board with Owen Jones doing a 180-degree turn to pronounce the Labour leader ready for office.

It would be the gravest mistake to place any belief in this display of unity.

Under conditions in which Corbyn's supporters now have a majority on Labour's ruling National Executive Committee and his policies have majority support at conference, the right wing have been thrown onto the back foot. But a leopard cannot change its spots. As the Socialist Equality Party explained in its first statement following Corbyn's 2015 leadership victory:

"No one can seriously propose that this party—which, in its politics and organisation and the social composition of its apparatus, is Tory in all but name—can be transformed into an instrument of working class struggle."

While Corbyn told the conference he hoped "we have left our own divisions behind," his critics feel no such compunction. As the conference began, 40 Labour MPs, led by the Blairite Chuka Umunna, issued an Open Letter demanding that Labour effectively support overturning the Brexit referendum result, in line with the demands of significant sections of the City of London and the military-intelligence establishment.

That same day, a meeting of the right-wing Labour First group was held on the fringes of conference. The remarks by Chris Leslie give the tenor of their ambitions. "We have to hold our ground to make sure Marxism never succeeds," he insisted. "It has no place in the modern Labour Party."

In a briefing to Labour First members, Luke Akehurst denounced those supporting Corbyn as "a minority of extremely cynical Leninists," out to "impose political change through violent revolution."

The *Sun*, owned by billionaire oligarch Rupert Murdoch, editorialised that Labour was now "mad, bad and dangerous" and led by "Marxist thugs" espousing "lunatic economics."

It is noticeable that no similar protests over the threat to democracy greeted the appearance of former United Kingdom Independence Party leader Nigel Farage in Berlin only a fortnight ago, where he spoke at a meeting of the extreme-right

Alternative for Germany, alongside the grand-daughter of Hitler's finance minister. Nor did Farage's appearance Tuesday in Alabama alongside Stephen Bannon, the fascistic head of *Breitbart News*, to back former state chief justice Roy Moore for Senate—a darling of the Christian right.

One of the most significant aspects of the conference was the admission that Corbyn supporters are carrying out “war gaming” exercises of various scenarios that could face a future Labour government, including moves by the financial oligarchy to organise a run on the pound.

Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell explained this was necessary to prepare for what happens if “they come for us.”

Asked whom he meant by “they”, Corbyn said McDonnell was referring to “the experience of past Labour governments, both Wilson governments had problems about that, and we need to look at all the scenarios.”

Corbyn is obliquely referencing the fact that the government led by Harold Wilson between 1974 and 1976, having come to power on the backs of a militant movement of the working class, was threatened with a military coup led by senior figures within the military and intelligence agencies.

In March 1976, Wilson suddenly resigned, and James Callaghan took over. Under conditions of an International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated economic siege, it was Callaghan who first ditched Labour's commitment to Keynesian-style welfare measures as it lurched ever further to the right.

These events took place shortly after the 1973 military coup in Chile, backed by the US, which overthrew the Popular Unity Government of President Salvador Allende. Thousands of workers and youth were rounded up, and hundreds machine-gunned in the Santiago soccer stadium, which had been turned into a torture centre.

As someone politically active in the 1970s and 1980s, Corbyn is fully aware of the dangers. But one does not have to go so far back. In 2015, when the pseudo-left coalition Syriza came to power on the backs of a mass movement against EU-imposed austerity, the IMF and Europe's central banks organised the crashing of the Greek economy to force that popular movement to submit.

Greek workers and youth turned out in enormous numbers to defiantly vote against austerity in the Syriza-organised referendum that year. In the end, it was the Syriza government itself that betrayed its mandate and now acts as the main force for imposing the dictates of Greek and European capital.

Today, when the global economic crisis is far greater than the 1970s, the danger of world war is closer than at anytime since the 1930s, and a sharp turn to authoritarian rule is apparent in the US, France, Germany and Spain, can anyone seriously doubt how the ruling elite will respond to a challenge to its monopolisation over economic and political life?

The powers-that-be are not “war gaming.” They are actively preparing for war.

If Corbyn was serious about implementing a single one of his pledges, he would alert the working class to the struggle they face to ensure their demands are met. And his first step would be immediate action against the fifth column in his own party.

Instead, despite a vastly increased mandate, Corbyn and Momentum even watered down proposed rule changes that would have weakened the right wing—leaving them free to plot and scheme. Meanwhile, McDonnell has held closed-door charm-offensive talks in the City of London to “reassure them” that his plans are nowhere near as radical as they have been made out.

Still, the pseudo-left groups seek to bolster a Corbyn-led Labour government as the only way forward.

The *Socialist Worker* noted weakly that “Labour will come under increasing pressure to show big businesses that it can govern ‘responsibly’ as it gets closer to being elected. Parts of Corbyn's speech were aimed at reassuring bosses.” While the Socialist Party complained that the Blairite Kier Starmer had been selected to give the main speech at conference on Brexit.

To all those workers and young people looking to reverse the attacks on jobs, wages and conditions, and to oppose the headlong rush of the ruling elite towards reaction and war, we urge: Learn the lessons of history.

Only a perspective and party whose programme meets up to the reality of existing social relations can provide a way forward. In the centenary year of the October 1917 revolution, the lessons must be drawn from the struggle organised and led by Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolshevik Party. What is necessary is to overthrow capitalism and reorganise society on a socialist foundation, free of social inequality and war. This is the programme fought for by the Socialist Equality Party, the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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