

UK: Election of pro-Corbyn slate to Labour's National Executive Committee underscores left shift in working class

By Chris Marsden
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The victory of the pro-Jeremy Corbyn slate in elections to Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC) confirms the leftward turn in the party membership and in the working class.

The Labour leader's much expanded support base among the party's membership, which has trebled to almost 600,000, was the reason for the creation of three new posts to the NEC, to be decided by a membership ballot. All three posts were won by candidates backed by Momentum, the campaign group backing Corbyn's leadership, led by Jon Lansman. He now has a significant majority on the 39-member NEC, which he has essentially controlled since last June's general election.

Lansman is joined on the NEC by Yasmine Dar and Rachel Garnham, who all secured more than 62,000 votes and a combined total of almost 200,000. The comedian Eddie Izzard was the closest contender in a slate supported by the anti-Corbyn Labour First and the Blairite think-tank, Progress, with just 39,000 votes.

This latest victory makes the position of former opponents of Corbyn, such as Deputy leader Tom Watson, yet more precarious—coming in the aftermath of last June's gains in the snap general election called by Prime Minister Theresa May. Corbyn is now in control of his cabinet and, following various reshuffles, has a majority of the party membership and now on the NEC. His last cabinet reshuffle this month appointed no new frontbenchers at all out of 13 appointments to what Corbyn proclaimed to be “a government in waiting,” given the desperate crisis of the May government.

The NEC victory was met with warnings of a purge of “moderates” from the party. Attention is focused on a review of party democracy led by Katy Clark, the former MP who lost her seat in 2015. Among the changes being considered is a proposal for whether MPs should face

mandatory reselection by party members and affiliated trade union branches.

A pro-Corbyn NEC vote still depends on the backing of the major trade unions. At least two major unions, Unison and the GMB, may oppose the change on the NEC, precipitating a possible conflict that neither Corbyn nor Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell would want.

For this reason, the hopes of the right to curb the left's influence has focused on the possibility of a change in the leadership of Britain's biggest union, Unite. The union has three seats on the NEC and is led by Len McCluskey. It acts as the locus for other pro-Corbyn unions, such as the Communication Workers Union. However, last year's re-election of the Unite General Secretary is under statutory investigation at the request of right-wing runner-up Gerard Coyne, who alleged malpractice in June 2017 to an independent certification officer.

Nevertheless, Corbyn's continued ascendancy led to warnings of the danger of the right-wing losing a civil war—summed up in Rupert Murdoch's the *Sun*, describing yesterday's result as threatening “to take Labour back to the socialist 1970s.”

Writing in the *Observer* December 2, former deputy Labour leader under Tony Blair, Roy Hattersley, opposed any accommodation to Corbyn's leadership. Citing a small number of deselection bids, he warned that unless “Real Labour” challenges “far-left subversion,” “democratic socialism could die a slow death.”

On December 29, the BBC ran an “in-depth” feature, “The local battles being fought within Labour,” that reads like a transcript of Hattersley's worst nightmare. “We are in dark times for moderate Labour. I do worry and I do believe that the Labour Party as I've known it in my life is probably finished,” states Nora Mulready, “a Labour activist in Haringey.”

However, others on the right are calculating that Corbyn has no stomach for internal warfare despite his statement that the review underway will “open up our party from top to bottom.”

Warning against panic, Andrew Rawnsley wrote in the *Observer* January 7 insisting that there are limits to Corbyn’s “long march through the institutions.”

“Most Labour councillors are not Corbynites. The party’s most prominent mayors—Andy Burnham in Manchester and Sadiq Khan in London—are not Corbynites. The majority of Labour MPs are not Corbynite,” he stressed.

“Momentum has become an influential force, but it is not so potent as it is sometimes portrayed” and has not made inroads outside of London, he adds. With Labour only slightly ahead of the Tories, “Any Labour MP who is told that he or she will not be allowed to stand for the party at the next election could always carry on sitting in parliament in the meantime, using the platform to say exactly what they think about Corbyn Labour. Or a deselected MP could resign and fight a by-election which they might win if they were popular locally...”

Even now, sections of the right-wing are more concerned with shaping the political agenda of a Corbyn government than a head-on confrontation—above all committing the party to a second referendum reversing Brexit to provide an alternative political leadership to May’s unravelling government. On Monday, the EU’s chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, met key EU-backing MPs, including Labour’s Chuka Umunna, Chris Leslie and Stephen Doughty.

Corbyn wants to maintain Labour’s support among workers who voted for Brexit, until there is a clear majority for a shift. But there is every possibility that Corbyn will shift the party’s position in line with the demands of key sections of big business and the City of London. He is at present walking a fine line, telling ITV’s *Peston on Sunday* that Labour is “not supporting or calling for a second referendum” on the UK’s EU membership but refusing to rule out doing so after a “meaningful vote” by parliament on the final deal struck. Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry said that if 90 percent of people were calling for another vote, it would present a challenge “for all of us who are democrats.”

The leader of the TSSA union, Manuel Cortes, wrote in the *Daily Mirror* yesterday arguing that Corbyn’s remarks “rightly exposed as a fallacy the idea that we can leave the EU and remain a member of the Single Market

(SM)... So, staying within the EU is now looking like the simplest route to maintaining that access. And electing Jeremy Corbyn our Prime Minister remains our greatest hope of staying within the EU in a reformed relationship with it.”

What Corbyn cannot finesse, in securing his overarching goal of “party unity,” is any refusal to oppose the savage cuts being imposed by Labour councils up and down the country.

In every major urban conurbation, right-wing Labour councils are criticised by the party’s “left” as they impose the savage cuts demanded by the government. In the last month alone, Wirral Council has committed to impose cuts to address a £61 million shortfall. In Lancashire, the Labour group is imposing £11 million in cuts to “balance the books.” In Birmingham, 150 carers for the elderly out of workforce of 350 face the sack.

Now that Corbyn is so clearly in control, any failure to take a stand against the right will expose before millions of workers the real character of his leadership—a means of suppressing a mobilisation of the working class, rather than leading one.

The latest indication of Corbyn’s readiness to appease the right was provided by the resignation of one of his leading supporters, Chris Williamson, from the shadow cabinet, after he called for a doubling of council tax on well-off homes to offset the crisis facing local government. He was gone within days, with the *Guardian* noting, “Labour’s leadership team are keen to avoid providing political ammunition to the Tories, particularly on economic issues, where the shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, wants to exert discipline on tax and spending pledges.”

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