



UK: Defiance, not Compliance, with renewed antisemitism witch hunt

Dave Stockton, redflagonline Mon, 06/08/2018 - 09:02

Dave Stockton, redflagonline

It's August, often called the silly season, but the latest campaign against Jeremy Corbyn and some of his prominent supporters is no laughing matter. This is not because there is evidence to support accusations, made in the press with the open collusion of members of the right-wing dominated Parliamentary Labour Party, that he has tolerated, or even encouraged, antisemitism in the Labour Party. Rather, it is because those accusations have not been met by a strong and united rebuttal from the left.

On the contrary, figures on the left, including from Momentum, have made concession after concession, admitting that there is a problem of antisemitism in the Party and accepting expulsions for supposed "antisemitic" views. If anyone thought this would "put the issue to bed", they could not have been more mistaken. It is like paying Danegeld. They only come back for more.

The latest trumped up "scandal" stems from the adoption by Labour's NEC of its own, slightly amended, version of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, IHRA, definition and its accompanying examples. The NEC version omitted or rejected four of the "examples", mainly relating to criticism of the state of Israel, and added some drawn from the traditional socialist critique such as "equating Jews with capitalists or the ruling class".

The NEC correctly rejected those examples which defined as antisemitism comparing Israeli policies to those of the Nazis or "claiming the creation of the Jewish state was a racist endeavour". Another two examples omitted refer to "holding Israel to higher standards than other countries" and accusing Jewish people of "being more loyal to Israel than their home country".

Then came a letter, signed by 68 Rabbis, demanding that Labour "listen to the Jewish community", which they claim to speak for "with one Jewish voice", and adopt the IHRA definition of antisemitism, together with all its examples. This was carried on the front pages of the Jewish Chronicle, the Jewish News and the Jewish Telegraph. It talked of an "existential threat to Jewish life in this country" that would be posed by a Jeremy Corbyn-led government.

Stephen Pollard, editor of the Jewish Chronicle, also wrote, "I have always felt safe in Britain, my country. If Corbyn takes power I will no longer". This must count as the most ridiculous piece of demagoguery carried by supposedly respectable papers for decades.

In its commentary on these statements, Jewish Voice for Labour points out that the Jewish News, one of the joint editorial signatories, itself makes clear that, "Supporters of the Jewish state concentrate on the IHRA definition, in order to highlight that it's antisemitic to call Israel a racist state". Furthermore, in March, the Israel-Britain Alliance and We Believe in Israel lobbied Theresa May to introduce legislation to ban events on college campuses called "Israel apartheid week" on the basis that to call Israel an apartheid state was a violation of the IHRA antisemitism definition.

Thus it should be clear that what the 58 Rabbis and the three Jewish weeklies want is not that Labour should accept and enforce the Jewish definition of antisemitism but the Zionist, that is, the pro-Israeli, one. The only criticism then allowed would be secondary, partial criticism of Israeli actions or policies.

The right wing majority of the PLP, as they did in 2016 and 2017, rushed to the Tory and Liberal press to support the Rabbis' demand that Labour reverse its decision and accept the IHRA definition in full.

Moreover, these MPs used the last PLP meeting of the parliamentary session to pass an emergency resolution ordering all Labour MPs to ignore the NEC resolution and to "accept and abide by the full International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism, including all of its accompanying examples". This draws attention once more, if this were needed, to the fact that a majority of the PLP regard themselves as above the party's discipline, either local or national.

In the Commons, Margaret Hodge buttonholed Corbyn behind the Speaker's chair after the votes on Brexit, according to HuffPost UK raging, "You're a fucking antisemite and a racist. You have proved you don't want people like me in the party?. And, when disciplinary action was mentioned, she threatened to take the party to court.

The serially disloyal anti-Corbyn MPs rushed to their friends in the media with the usual spate of claims about rampant antisemitism. Their real purpose became clear when it was revealed that an unnamed right winger on the NEC had secretly recorded the session that discussed the Rabbis' letter. Then, as this year's elections for the membership representatives on the NEC opened, they leaked comments made by Peter Willsman at the NEC meeting to the press.

"Some of these people in the Jewish community support Trump; they're Trump fanatics and all the rest of it" he said. "So I am not going to be lectured to by Trump fanatics making up daft information without any evidence at all."

Curious, inept perhaps, but nothing antisemitic. The reason for the mock-outrage of the the right is that he dared to challenge the reverend signatories' right to speak for the whole Jewish community and to dictate to the Labour party what it regards as antisemitism. All the usual suspects in the PLP pantheon, including Luciana Berger and Wes Streeting, rushed to demand sanctions against Willsman, including his suspension, which would make him ineligible to stand in the NEC elections. The Board of Deputies even demanded his expulsion.

Tom Watson, the disgraced and disloyal deputy leader, denounced Willsman as "a loud mouhed bully". Now there's a case of the pot calling the kettle black if ever there was one! He claimed MPs had made it "absolutely clear there should be disciplinary procedures" against the NEC member.

The new general secretary, Jennie Formby, warned of "disciplinary action if he were to repeat his behaviour". More surprising, but equally shameful, is that Naz Shah MP, previous victim of a hounding by the right, showed her repentance by joining in the witch hunt, endorsing the call for disciplinary proceedings.

Caught up as they are in the Westminster and media bubbles, the National Coordinating Group, NCG, of Momentum has now decided to dump Peter Willsman from the list of 9 NEC candidates it was recommending. The general secretary of the Fire Brigades' Union, Matt Wrack, condemned the group, and Jon Lansman, for "bottling it".

"This decision is inept, cowardly and completely arbitrary. There was no discussion internally, it was imposed by the leadership." He called, absolutely correctly, for the democratisation of Momentum. Momentum director Christine Shawcroft also urged activists to continue to back Willsman in defiance of the NCG decision.

Of course, Momentum's running up the white flag has not helped ease the pressure. Whenever sharks scent blood, a feeding frenzy ensues. Richard Angell, director of the Blairite right wing Progress, derided Momentum's decision as a "half-measure" adding, "Willsman should not just be off their slate but off the whole NEC and facing disciplinary action".

The Jewish Labour Movement, JLM, has also targeted Chris Williamson, the left wing, Derby North MP saying he "should be suspended indefinitely" because he was silent when a member at a Liverpool Momentum meeting described those who were fomenting the witch hunt as "foot soldiers of Israel".

This inadvertently reveals what the whole campaign is about. It is an attempt to divert public attention at a time when

Israeli Defence Force snipers have killed 153 young Palestinians, several only 14 years old, on the fences around Gaza, when Israel's hard right defence minister, Avigdor Lieberman, announced that fuel deliveries would be cut off until further notice.

On 27 July, he said the best way to stop more attacks on Israeli citizens in the occupied West Bank would be to expand its settlements. He promptly announced 400 new homes would be built in Adam, near Ramallah, in revenge for the stabbing of a settler by a Palestinian youth. At the same time, the Knesset inscribes in the Zionist settler state's constitution that only Jews have the right to 'national self-determination' in Israel. Apartheid state? Racist project? QED!

Denying Israel recognition as a legitimate, democratic expression of the Jewish people's right to possess Palestine and, in the process, to exclude or imprison its indigenous population, is NOT antisemitism. Nevertheless, socialists should be the last to claim that real antisemitism does not exist or that, if it does, it is insignificant.

Alongside the slave trade, the genocide of the indigenous populations of the Americas and Australia and the colonial exploitation of Asian and African indentured labour, antisemitism is one of the great taproots of racism. Britain itself, which likes to present itself as innocent of antisemitism, threw up barriers to Jewish immigration in 1906 and refused to let in more than a handful of refugees from Hitler.

We should note too that the Islamophobic tropes used by the far right revival in Britain bear more than a passing resemblance to Hitler and Mosely's antisemitism. Antisemitism's centrality for the Nazis, the enormity of the Holocaust and its revival by racist populist and fascist movements in eastern Europe today, should warn us of its living danger.

As a mass party, Labour needs to be ever vigilant and should take action against any member who resorts to it. The various forms of social media undoubtedly provide a way of spreading antisemitism. But reliable testimonies as to what happens at branch meetings, GCs and at the Party's political and social gatherings, or at Momentum events, do not in any way confirm the charge that antisemitism is rife in Labour under Jeremy Corbyn.

Unless, that is, you define antisemitism as any serious criticism of the state of Israel. The prospect of a Labour Leader who supports the Palestinians' right to statehood and who condemns the brutal attacks on them by the IDF, is reason enough for the Labour Right and pro-Israel forces in the party to do all in their power to prevent Labour under Corbyn coming to power. Their weapons are not free speech and open debate about Israel and its actions but an attempt to slander, intimidate and silence its critics.

The humiliating collapse of national Momentum in the face of this latest witch hunt testifies to the fact that the constitution imposed on it by Jon Lansman is an obstacle to its development. An atomised membership, consulted only in the form of online plebiscites, is not fit for purpose. It will neither defend Corbyn's leadership against the right nor prove a critical and creative force for developing anticapitalist policies for a Labour government faced with the mayhem caused by Brexit. The local Labour left and Momentum groups need to reject the cowardice and defeatism of Lansman and Co.

Red Flag's advice is:

- ? Vote for Peter Willsman on the original Momentum list
- ? Demand the right to reselect MPs before a general election
- ? Defiance, not compliance, with the witch hunt
- ? Expose Israel's crimes against the Palestinians
- ? Fight for a left wing Labour government