

# Britain: a new strategy for a new movement

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The outright victory for the Tories in Britain's general election on May 7 was certainly a shock for the British labour movement in general and for the far left organisations in particular. One immediate issue it raised was the attitude to Labour's defeat. Was it a cause for dismay, a matter of complete indifference or a great opportunity, even 'our turn next?', for the far left?

Before the election, the non-Labour left generally continued the theme of how right wing Labour had become, its Pasokification, so-called after the Greek party that had been crushed by its own support for austerity and replaced by Syriza.

This scenario was seemingly confirmed by Labour's wipe out in Scotland (all but one seat!) but even here the total rout was gained only thanks to Britain's iniquitous first past the post electoral system. Though the SNP gained 50 per cent of the total vote, Labour still scored 24.3 per cent (1.4 million to 707,000).

Those light-minded leftists who celebrated this, in England as well as in Scotland, seemed unphased by the fact that it had been achieved by a completely capitalist nationalist party that had merely stolen Labour's old clothes to con voters into thinking that this was an anti-austerity vote.

Different sections of the left, the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition, TUSC, or Left Unity, even saw themselves as the potential Syriza, but a number of developments poured cold water on this fantasy. Far from collapsing, Labour's vote went up, by 650,000, a gain of 1.5 percent on the 2010 result.

Within weeks of the election, 60,000 people joined the Labour Party, bringing its individual membership to 221,247, its highest for 15 years. TUSC, in contrast, gained 36,368 votes for 135 candidates (an average of 0.1 per cent). Once again, reports of Labour's death are, as the old saying goes, somewhat exaggerated.

Of course, this did not stop the Tory and Liberal media launching a media blitzkrieg about how Red Ed had lost Labour the election with his dinosaur socialist policies; like slamming the Tories for fostering inequality, condemning non-dom tax evaders, promising to end Zero Hours contracts, and imposing a mansion tax. Labour's racist right wing added that the campaign had not sufficiently addressed traditional Labour voters' 'fears on immigration'.

All these policies, dubbed 'the politics of envy', it was said, had lost Labour 'the aspirational voter' (a.k.a. the middle classes). The fact that after Miliband's 'left' speeches there was usually a rise in Labour's poll ratings, whereas after his nasty pandering to Ukip on immigration there was no response, was quietly ignored. After all, if Farage's obsessions are central to a voter's thinking then they will vote UKIP.

The other prong of the attack was to demand even greater insults to Len McCluskey and Unite, even more reduction in his members' influence whilst still trousering his union's £3.5 million contribution to the 2015

?war chest?. In the Blairite coterie of the Parliamentary Labour Party, PLP, and the infestation of think tanks around it, this was orchestrated by the billionaire's yachting companion, Peter Mandelson, that is, Baron Mandelson of Foy. The broken Miliband effectively confirmed all this nonsense by immediately resigning and precipitating an election for Labour leader.

A series of well-prepped right-wingers were quick off the starting blocks; Liz Kendall, Mary Creagh, Chuka Umuna and Tristram Hunt. Two more centre-right candidates, Andy Burnham and Yvette Cooper, also advanced their claims. All of them made essentially the same speech; rubbishing Ed Miliband's election manifesto and campaign as appearing too left, too fixated on the ?politics of envy?, too interested in wooing Labour's traditional base, that is, the working class.

Liz Kendall, the arch Blairite, has been the most outspoken, telling a meeting of Westminster correspondents:

?I want to lead a Labour Party that's genuinely as passionate about wealth creation as we are about wealth distribution. I want Labour not just to ?understand? business but to be the champion of people who take a risk, create something, build it up and make a success of it.?

Not to be outdone, Andy Burnham, probably the TU leaders' favourite as the ?realistic candidate?, talked of the need for Labour to treat ?entrepreneurs? as ?heroes, in the same way as nurses?.

All of them emphasised that Labour should have been appealing to ?aspirational? people, the sort who shop at John Lewis and Waitrose. Harriet Harman, Labour's stand-in leader, added to the display by suggesting Labour supporters she had met were secretly glad that Labour had not won because its economic policies were not credible, that is, were not pro-austerity enough.

Such blatant advocacy of surrender, on the eve of the most massive assault on the welfare state since its creation, showed the arrogance of the Labour Right in the PLP. They simply think they own the Labour Party lock, stock and barrel, no matter who pays for them, who does the hard work of getting them elected, let alone the millions of working class people who vote for them as a protection against the Tories' attacks.

### **Labour's dilemma**

Jeremy Corbyn's late entry into the contest meant it was not certain he would get the 35 nominations needed to get onto the ballot. In the end, he relied on nominations by notorious right-wingers like Frank Field and others who openly admitted that they did not support his views. This ?support? was granted primarily to ensure a degree of credibility for the contest; a grudging recognition of the indignation aroused amongst Labour supporters by the idea of only having a choice between hard and soft New Labour candidates.

Tens of thousands of new members did not join Labour in the aftermath of the election because they believed Mandelson's and Kendall's disloyal assertions that Labour lost because it was ?too left-wing?. They joined because huge numbers of people still see Labour as some sort of political barrier to the Tories' slash-and-burn austerity policies, in spite of its wretched record in opposition and local government.

### **A Left alternative**

Elected MP for Islington North in 1983, he has supported every important strike and progressive struggle, joined picket lines and countless marches in the decades since.

By one of those ironies of history, the one-member-one vote ?reforms? pressed for by the right wing

dominated Parliamentary Labour Party, the media and the Tories, which was supposed to break the power of the trade unions over the party they founded, is now rebounding on them. The franchise has been extended to 'supporters' who merely have to register online and pay £3. Thousands of people are now doing just that, precisely because Corbyn is standing.

This enables people inside and outside the Labour Party to deliver a hearty slap in the face to the arrogant Labour right and the Tory press that backs them by paying their £3 and voting for Jeremy Corbyn. It seems, according to opinion polls, that he is running second to Andy Burnham the candidate quietly backed by all the union leaders.

It is symptomatic, however, that, at its annual conference, Unite, Britain's largest union, backed Corbyn as first preference. In fact, McCluskey and the leadership had to back him in order to fend off motions questioning the union's affiliation to Labour. Corbyn's campaign, it is suggested, proves that Labour can be reformed after all.

Barring a total upset, which would throw the whole party into an epic crisis, even a big minority vote for Corbyn will encourage the growth of those forces in the Party eager to join in the mass movement that was born on June 20. Indeed, he has made it clear at the hustings and meetings around the country, that his campaign is aimed at helping to build this movement.

Unsurprisingly, the two largest far left groups, the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party, are rather po-faced in their support.

Judith Orr in Socialist Worker concludes:

'Whoever wins, the possibility for real resistance to the Tories will not come through the Labour machine. Workers cannot afford to wait till September, let alone another five years, in the vain hope that Labour will build real opposition to the Tories' assault.'

Who is waiting till September? Who is claiming resistance will come 'through the Labour machine'? Certainly not Jeremy Corbyn.

Likewise, in the Socialist Party newspaper, which has been arguing for years that Labour was no longer any sort of working class party, Peter Taaffe grumbles:

'[W]e do not believe that he will succeed in reclaiming Labour as a political weapon for the workers' movement. Any attempt to foster illusions that his challenge could do this, is a dead end. The process has gone too far, transforming Labour into a British version of the Democrats in the USA.'

This might seem strange for a group that once thought that building an alternative could only go through the Labour Party and that all those not in its ranks were 'on the fringes of the labour movement.'

## **United Front**

We certainly do not believe Labour, even the Labour Left, is the force chosen by history to lead the resistance to the destruction of the welfare state, let alone to achieve socialism. But we do believe that Labour remains a working class party, what Lenin and Trotsky called a 'bourgeois workers' party' and part of the workers' movement. It is bourgeois because of its policies, which are pro-capitalist, and its leaders who are middle class career politicians, not leaders in the class struggle.

Nonetheless, despite constant attacks on union leaders like Len McCluskey, the party's roots still lie in the unions, witness the £11 million in donations paid in 2014. Blair's attempt to win the support of a significant

section of the capitalist class to Labour proved an abject failure. Working class people still vote Labour to defend themselves against Tory attacks, however much they are deceived in its willingness or ability to do this.

Labour remains the historic link tying the labour movement to the bosses and their policies. It is a link that needs to be broken. This can only be done through the action of huge numbers of workers, including Labour supporters and voters, not by trying to kill it with curses from groups a few thousand strong, no matter how inflated their leaders' egos.

We also believe that a new, genuinely socialist, working class party needs to be built. That is why Workers Power supporters are members of Left Unity, but groups for making socialist propaganda will not build such a party just by recruiting to their own organisations.

It is necessary to mobilise the whole workers' movement for its vital interests. This will create the best conditions for hundreds of thousands of workers to realise that they need an entirely new type of party to fight capitalism to a finish.

A successful, indeed victorious, fight back against the Tories, cannot await the day when either Left Unity or TUSC succeed in building a mass party or till the Labour right succeeds in casting the unions adrift for good. To that end, we need a genuine mass united front of all the forces in the labour movement, all those suffering from the Tory onslaught and fighting it. It will need the activists in Left Unity and TUSC, those from the revolutionary left groups, libertarians, the student movement, etc. We need massive forces from the trade unions and the multitude of campaigns fighting for all the sectors hit by austerity. But we will also need the members, supporters and voters of the Labour Party.

Indeed, we also need those Labour MPs and councillors who will speak out against austerity and vote against it, whether in parliament or in the council chambers. Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell, Owen Jones are already key figures in the movement re-launched by the massive demonstration in London on June 20. To win, we have to be tous ensemble all together, providing we are united in action.

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