

The British Labour Party and the aftermath of Corbyn's Victory

Dave Stockton Thu, 05/11/2015 - 03:24

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Jeremy Corbyn's runaway victory in the Labour leadership election (59.5 percent ? 251, 417 votes on a 76.3 per cent turnout) has initiated something of a revolution within the British Labour Party. Liz Kendall, the candidate who identified herself most clearly with the legacy of Tony Blair, received a humiliating 4.5 per cent, 18,857 votes. The Centre-Right candidates, Andy Burnham and Yvette Cooper, received 19 per cent and 17 per cent respectively.

Corbyn's victory has fractured the Right and Centre-Right's decades long dictatorship and broken their paralysing grip on the Party rank and file. It has revived a Labour Left that had long seemed moribund. Above all, it has stimulated a massive increase in the membership of the Party, which declined consistently under Blair and Brown from 405,000 in 1997 to 176,891 at the end of 2007. Even in Opposition, under Ed Miliband, 2010-15, it only rose modestly to 220,000 just before the 2015 election.

The Party is now reported to be approaching 400,000 members. Between 5 May and 5 October, 183,658 people joined the party, more than the entire membership of the Conservative Party. In addition, more than 100,000 registered as voting supporters and 80,000 as trade union supporters. What is more, 16,000 volunteered to be active in the Jeremy Corbyn for Labour Leader campaign.

Nonetheless, the most remarkable feature of Corbyn's victory is the scale of the change that its political content represents in terms of the ideology that has been dominant in the Labour Party for well nigh twenty years.

Corbyn's campaign explicitly rejected the 'austerity-lite' of the Labour Establishment as well as the austerity heavy of Cameron and Osborne. This break with both the neoliberal and social-liberal consensus did not come from any significant section of the political elite but from the milieu of popular resistance. A powerful voice from below has rudely interrupted the 'hegemonic narrative'.

In their speeches to the Party's annual conference, Jeremy Corbyn and his closest ally, John McDonnell, who he appointed shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister), denounced austerity as a deliberately anti-working class policy. They condemned the Tories' new Welfare Bill as punishing the poorest whilst giving tax handouts to the super wealthy. This was an open rebuke to the former leadership, which had directed Labour MPs to vote for the Bill.

On the Tories' (anti) Trade Union Bill, Corbyn not only denounced it but also proudly acknowledged the role trades unions and socialists played in founding the Labour Party. Labour leaders from Blair to Miliband have been trying to distance themselves from the unions and to renounce socialism for two decades. Even more shockingly, in its contrast with past policy, Corbyn made clear his opposition to renewing the Trident nuclear missile programme and stated that if he were prime minister he would refuse to press the 'red

button? for a nuclear holocaust.

However, if Corbyn's campaign and victory, and his policy pronouncements, have initiated something of a revolution in the Labour Party, it is very far from consolidated. In response to the statement on Trident, a number of Shadow Cabinet members, Maria Eagle, Hilary Benn, Andy Burnham, openly contradicted him. Indeed, bit by bit, prominent Right and Centre-Right figures in the Parliamentary Labour Party, PLP, have been making clear their rejection of Corbyn's key policy proposals.

According to the Guardian, on the day of the declaration of Corbyn's victory, a Team Corbyn member observed that "some Labour officials wore black to register their concern. The atmosphere in the hall was like someone booking a wedding in the same hotel as a funeral". The first PLP meeting was also "frosty".

His victory in the one-member-one-vote system (which replaced the electoral college of one-third MPs, one-third trade union affiliates and one-third constituency delegates) did not mean that the policies on which he was elected became Party policy. In addition, it should be noted that the PLP is not under the control of the Annual Conference or the Party Executive. Nor are Labour MPs under the control of, let alone removable by, the party rank and file. A formidable series of constitutional barbed wire entanglements protects the MPs from the will of Party members. In addition, they have easy access to the right wing media, especially the Daily Mail, and are using it to the full.

This situation of a barely concealed civil war between Corbyn and the right wing majority of MPs, with only about 20 really supporting him, is likely to continue until a major change is made to democratise policy making and put the PLP under the control of the membership. Already, some MPs have had the impudence to run to the media complaining of a witch hunt against them, just because they have been criticised on Facebook.

Indeed, to realise the full potential of the influx of new members and Corbyn's victory, it is vital first of all to change the official policies of the Labour Party at national and at local level. Then it will be possible to demand that the representatives of the Party carry out its policy. If they will not, then it will be a matter of elementary democracy to remove the obstructive blocks in Parliament, in the local councils and, last but not least, in the bureaucracy in the Party HQ.

Without changing this balance of forces in the party, sooner or later a Right and Centre-Right counterrevolution is possible, indeed it is inevitable. In addition, the support for Corbyn from the unions can only be secured if the movement for militant policies against austerity and for rank and file democracy spreads to the unions' memberships. This will only be a possibility if the unions themselves undertake a mass recruitment of new members. There is much to be done on this front; the union-affiliated supporters showed the lowest increase of the three categories although, of course, many of the new members were probably unionists too.

Watch your leaders

On 12 September, Owen Jones, Guardian columnist and the most popular speaker after Corbyn at meetings up and down the country, wrote an article with the title, "If Jeremy Corbyn's victory was an incredible political achievement, it was the easy bit."

Why is this, despite the large majority of party members in all categories voting for Corbyn and his programme?

Quite simply, a party that has been under the domination of the Right for three decades is not turned around in one summer of mass meetings. Most of the voters were new to the Labour Party and are still hardly integrated into it. It is as though Corbyn, McDonnell, Dianne Abbot (MP for Hackney North and

Stoke Newington) and another fifteen or twenty MPs had been catapulted into a fortress where the Parliamentary Party, the Party bureaucracy and the great majority of local councillors are openly hostile to them. True, outside the walls there is a huge army of supporters, but the Labour Party's battlements are still lined with open enemies, determined to take them prisoner, or worse.

Most of the 231 Labour MPs were, and remain, viscerally opposed to Corbyn's policies. The same is true of most of the 7,000 Labour councillors in local authorities up and down the country, many of whom have been selling-off council owned land and council housing, school playing fields and other accumulated public goods and still making cuts in services, obedient to the Coalition's austerity dictates. Most of the Shadow Cabinet, too, are on public record as opposed to the policies of their leader.

Effectively, there is dual power in the Labour Party with a few MPs and the leader, plus hundreds of thousands of new members and supporters on the one side and the Party machine, the Parliamentary Labour Party, the establishment in local authorities and constituencies on the other.

The question is, will Corbyn and his small band of MPs and campaign loyalists be able to throw open the gates of the party decision-making structures to these hundreds of thousands of members or will they be taken prisoner by the Right? The answer to this question should not be left to the firmness of character of Corbyn and his comrades. It is the movement that put him there, the militant policies they supported, that must come to the forefront.

Now, it is no longer a matter of 'supporting Jeremy' or John McDonnell, whatever they do, but of fighting for the policies we voted for and for the power to implement them not only within the Party but, more importantly, to put them into action within a transformed fighting labour movement.

It would be fatal if a justified focus on transforming Labour into a genuine workers' party let the union leaders sink back into inactivity in the fight against austerity on the streets and in the workplaces. Historians of the British labour movement often point to what they call 'the pendulum effect' whereby British workers are supposed to alternate between militant trade union struggles and electoralism via the Labour Party. We need to combine both, indissolubly, if we are to decisively break the mould of falling union membership and historically low strike figures on the one hand and a Tory-Lite Labour Party on the other.

The watchword in both spheres must be to control our leaders.

Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell have already made unwise concessions to the Centre-Right MPs and party functionaries. Some were difficult to avoid, given the huge imbalance within the PLP, but they will have serious consequences. In particular, appointing opponents to all the key positions dealing with Foreign Affairs (Hilary Benn) and Defence, (Maria Eagle) could have very serious implications in the months to come.

These are the key posts in which Labour's loyalty to British imperialism or to the international working class will be tested. We can have little doubt where Benn and Eagle place their loyalty. Already, at a meeting between these shadow ministers, it has been decided that Labour could vote in the Commons in support of UK aircraft bombing in Syria, even without a UN Security Council mandate. Doubtless a 'conscience clause' will allow left MPs to vote against but, since a pledge to oppose all such war moves was key to Corbyn's campaign, it would be seen as major betrayal that would demoralise many of his supporters.

Another serious consequence of these concessions is the avoidance of a fight over the right of the membership to select their parliamentary candidates before the next general election, 'mandatory

reselection". Unless this is reversed within the next year or so, it will saddle a majority left wing membership with a disloyal PLP selected in the days of Blair, Brown and Miliband's Blue Labour. If the Corbyn revolution is truly to triumph, it needs to cleanse the Westminster and Town Hall Augean stables.

Unless the new forces joining the Party launch a movement to systematically democratise the selection of candidates and, wherever necessary, replace MPs who are out of sympathy with, and unwilling to work to implement, the new policies, the movement will fail. To talk of democratising the party and, indeed, the UK's system of government, whilst leaving MPs free of any real control by their party when they stand or by their voters after their election, is an utter sham. On this, too, the "straight talking" which Corbyn advocates is urgently needed.

As shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell shocked everybody by stating that Labour would support George Osborne's fiscal charter, designed to guarantee "budget responsibility" by balancing the books. Incredibly, this would limit what a future Labour government could borrow to finance any major public spending projects. Where this incredible capitulation to the Labour Right came from is anybody's guess. Fortunately, he rapidly did a U-turn, citing the closures in the steel industry and the loss of workers' jobs as having persuaded him to withdraw this proposal.

On the councillors and their opposition or, rather, their non-opposition, to cuts, McDonnell has made an even more serious concession. He has made it clear that he does not expect them to refuse to set cuts budgets next year:

"The situation the councils are now in is if they don't set a budget, a council officer will do it for them. There is no choice for them any more."

If this concession to the Right is persisted in, then the foundation for an anti-austerity and anti-cuts alliance between Labour and local grassroots resistance will be undermined. To make a revived and transformed Labour party integral to the fightback, requires a radical change by Labour councils. Otherwise, the fight against cuts will be just hot air in Parliament, maybe a few big demonstrations but no concerted action to halt them.

Keep up the Momentum

If the Corbyn Movement is to become a movement for fighting policies against austerity, against the threat of new hot wars in the Middle East and Nato expansion in Eastern Europe, a movement of deeds not just words, then the "momentum" must be towards class struggle in the coming months and towards democracy in the Labour Party and the trades unions.

There needs to be continuing mass recruitment, including to the youth and student organisations; a campaign to put delegate conferences in charge of local and regional policy, not MPs and councillors, to make annual conference the supreme policy decision making forum where delegates dominate the debates, documents can be amended, resolutions can be taken and the obstacles put in the way of this by conference arrangement committees are removed.

The goal of Labour's membership, new and old, needs to be winning the Party to the side of the working class in the struggle against the Tories, making it into a workers' party in its politics as well as in its roots in the Labour movement. As a first step, it must be to make the entire legacy of Blairism history.

Where Labour councillors are still cutting vital services, selling off or demolishing council housing and passing cuts budgets, clashes between them, and the MPs who support them, and the local and national movements of resistance, are inevitable. The question, "Which side are you on?" will be posed time and

again. There has to be a movement within the Labour Party which sides unequivocally with the resistance.

This means the creation of an inclusive and democratic united front which is pro-Corbyn's campaign pledges, built at local and national level, in the LP local branches and constituency parties, to resist the attacks from the Right and Centre -Right in the PLP etc. Where Corbyn and McDonnell back down on their pledges, they will have to be helped to see the error of their ways.

A step in this direction is the formation of Momentum. Local meetings of pro-Corbyn people, both inside and outside the Labour Party, are joining this. It proclaims itself as the Corbyn for Leader campaign rebranded, pledging to 'organise in every town, city and village to create a mass movement for real progressive change?; to 'make Labour a more democratic party, with the policies and collective will to implement them in government?; and to 'bring together individuals and groups in our communities and workplaces to campaign and organise on the issues that matter to us.?

Already local groups are springing up and getting active. It could be just what the left needs, providing it is not diverted into either duplicating the already existing anti-cuts movement (the so-called People's Assemblies) or becoming an amorphous 'social movement?. It must keep its focus on winning the Labour Party itself away from the comfort zone of most MPs and councillors, the debating chambers in Whitehall and the Town Halls, and onto the streets and the picket lines.

In no way does this mean ignoring elections and the huge opportunity they provide to address the mass of the working class who vote Labour. The Left must support all Labour candidates and prove themselves the best vote winners and recruiters to the Party. We must do this both because we want to win the respect of workers who are loyal to Labour because they see it as their party, and because we want to kick the Tories out of every position of power they presently hold and help hasten their downfall.

Last, but not least, with the recent experience of the Syriza left government in Greece and its miserable capitulation in mind, it is vital that revolutionaries in the Labour Party organise and fight for their ideas openly so that the members are prepared for the tremendous crisis that will develop if the Labour Party, under Corbyn's policies, looks as if it will win the next general election. They will have to develop a 'straight talking' debate on the question posed by Rosa Luxemburg over a century ago, Reform or Revolution?

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