

The Labour left after Corbyn: A chance to break with strategy of compromise

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Two successive election defeats, ending with Jeremy Corbyn's replacement as leader of the Labour Party by Keir Starmer, have opened a debate about the balance sheet of the Corbyn project, the objectives of the Labour left, and what role Momentum should play in the struggles to come.

Relieved of the pressure to 'get behind' the leadership, a flurry of articles and initiatives have emerged, reflecting on the defeat and arguing for a recomposition of Momentum with a greater focus on internal democracy and links with local communities. This opens up a number of questions which should have been dealt with long ago but have now become unavoidable.

The first question is one that the Labour left rarely asks: what is the Labour Party for? For most members, the answer is simple - to get a Labour government. This raises the bigger question: what is a Labour government for? Most left-wing members would say: socialism. But what is socialism? Is it what a left-led Labour government does? If so, then the left's only task is to install and defend a left-wing leader and get a Labour government elected.

Following just this line of circular reasoning, Momentum has always seen electing a Labour government as its first priority. Its goal was to make Corbyn's Labour a more effective electoral machine, help it to win power, and implement radical policies, which would then change the balance of class forces from above.

Behind Momentum's failures lies not just an inadequate organisational structure, but a failure of political strategy. From the moment it refused to countenance a debate about the purpose of a Labour government and the content of the socialist agenda, Momentum's fate was totally bound up with the fate of Jeremy Corbyn's leadership.

Its mistake was to misunderstand the relationship between state power and class power. Winning power, even in an election, depends not just on manifesto policies or social media reach, but on how the existing balance of class forces plays itself out in the electoral arena. Changing the balance of class forces, and understanding that elections are simply one terrain of a class struggle waged in multiple theatres, must come ahead of and alongside electioneering. Doing so requires a commitment to organising tactics which place the independence of the movement above electoral victory.

A series of interconnected crises - the coronavirus pandemic, the coming economic crash, and runaway climate change - pose immediate and colossal threats not just to the left or the working class, but to human civilisation. If Momentum, or any other Labour left organisation, is to effectively organise the labour movement in the struggles to overcome the capitalist system, it needs to reopen the debate around its political strategy and re-constitute itself as an independent political force recognising that class struggle is the engine of history.

Corbyn's compromises

Founded several weeks after tens of thousands joined the Labour Party during Corbyn's 2015 leadership campaign, Momentum styled itself as an activist power-base within Labour with an ambition to democratise the party and consolidate support for left-wing policies. In this ambition there was an inherent contradiction – was it to be a broad 'movement' or a political faction?

Left-wingers of all stripes recognised the objective need for an organisation which could harness the enthusiasm of the new, overwhelmingly young membership, outside of the party's official structures. The unwieldy ward and constituency structures of small groups of activists, committed to routine voter identification work and resting on a passive membership, were acknowledged by most to be totally unsuited to organising the massively expanded rank-and-file towards any collective social struggle.

From the outset, Corbyn's leadership was precarious; despite his thumping leadership victory, his supporters in the PLP could be counted on two hands, and the number of loyal party officials was scarcely greater. The new leadership recognised that the mass base which propelled it to power was also its only bulwark against a hostile core of right-wing officials and parliamentarians and saw the importance of cultivating a close link with the new members.

The infamous 'chicken coup' was defeated by mobilising this army of members and supporters and gave a huge impetus to the argument that Momentum should exist to support Corbyn rather than pursue an independent programme of democratic reforms or policy agenda.

The more Corbyn's success and appeal, and thus the fate of his leadership, became intertwined with its 'grassroots' image, the more important it was for the leadership to maintain support from left-wing members at all costs. Since both the apparatus and the members agreed on the importance of organised defence against right-wing saboteurs of Corbyn's anti-austerity agenda, the arrangement at first appeared natural, even inevitable to many.

At the same time, Corbyn opted for a strategy of compromise rather than confrontation with the party's right wing and the trade union bureaucracy. This was fatal. While the rank and file members wanted a Corbyn government to introduce long-lasting, hard-to-unpick social reforms that would eventually lead to socialism, the PLP majority and union officialdom wanted a Labour government to oversee a growing capitalist economy and only then introduce limited social reforms. Leaving aside criticisms of both perspectives, they are and proved to be incompatible.

At each turn, however, Corbyn's compromises strategically favoured the latter. The flagship promise to implement 'open selection' of MPs was ditched under pressure from Len McCluskey, in defiance of his union's mandate. Conference was allowed more debates but still no control over the manifesto. Councillors were told not to combat the Tory cuts by passing no cuts or deficit budgets – on pain of being expelled. Union and PLP pressure was also brought to bear on nuclear power, NATO, even Heathrow expansion and the bombing of Syria.

Most membership hopes for a 'transformative' Labour government were pinned on John McDonnell's economic programme. But even here the refusal to countenance nationalisation of the banks and the financial sector or the major polluters was a disastrous concession to the right. McDonnell and his 'new left' advisors repeatedly asserted that it was a clever trick to leave macroeconomic measures alone in order not to raise the hackles of the markets, attempting to cover over their lack of radicalism by promoting co-operatives as a 'new' solution. In the fiscal rule made famous by Tory austerity – no reforms until the economy grows – underpinned this submission to capitalism.

Red Flag has always argued that it is Corbyn's stance on international issues that were most objectionable to the right and their backers, the bourgeoisie. And the disputes over antisemitism and Brexit were the most damaging to the relationship between the leadership and the membership.

Jeremy was right to resist the adoption of a definition of antisemitism which explicitly curtailed the right to define Israel as a 'racist endeavour' because of its apartheid-like policy towards the Palestinians. When Momentum's Jon Lansman broke ranks with the leadership and began a witch-hunt against left NEC members, also voting with the right on the NEC, the left split and many exited Momentum.

On Brexit the left and right were both divided, but the manner in which Corbyn imposed his own position was deceptive and bureaucratic. Faced with the possibility of conference passing a 'remain and reform' motion, the NEC put forward a confusing and incoherent compromise for two years running, which essentially left it to the leadership's office and the PLP to decide policy on the hoof. The near unanimous adoption of an open borders motion on migration was meaningless when Corbyn's office repeatedly made clear that free movement would end with Brexit.

The more the contradictions of Corbyn's strategy were exposed, the greater became the risk of serious dissent within his left-wing base, and the more the leadership was compelled to stage-manage the movement, even if that meant suppressing and controlling its independent expression.

Momentum's strategy

Ultimately, Momentum not only failed to hold the leadership to account on its own promises of democratisation, it failed even to fight for these policies until it was far too late.

Instead, Momentum offered a diet of emails parroting the line from the leader's office. The World Transformed, initially a promising forum for open discussion of party policy, soon refused to participate in discussions of party strategy or to analyse the role of Momentum or that of the Labour Party itself. It became a talking shop, relegated to the literal fringes of conference, while the actual struggle over policy was being debated and decided on the floor.

How can we account for the thwarted aspirations of tens of thousands of Momentum members? How was the democratic and radical promise of Corbyn's euphoric election rallies channelled into bureaucratic inertia and loyalty-mongering? In the case of Momentum, it was imposed, through the now infamous 'Lansman coup', which suppressed the organisation's embryonic democratic structures by fiat.

The unsolved contradictions inherent in Momentum's foundation came to a breaking point and had to be resolved.

Under Jon Lansman's leadership, Momentum's 'socialist' mission became synonymous with winning internal elections in order to consolidate Corbyn's hold on the party, and mobilising ground troops for general elections, the ultimate determinant of any party leader's fate. Any potential for a genuinely independent political organisation fighting for its own conception of socialism within and outside the Labour Party was crushed and the organisation was registered as a private company (proprietor Jon Lansman).

The National Coordinating Group (NCG) stripped local Momentum groups of any official status, depriving the membership of the ability to determine campaigning priorities or opportunities for national coordination of local struggles. Branches were left isolated, unaware of successes elsewhere and lacking forums to debate strategy and tactics. If Momentum's national office did get involved, it was as likely to be disruptive, as in the case of Labour Against Racism and Fascism. Unsurprisingly the real, active Labour left did not all join Momentum and eventually the distinction was ignored as the left built up their own

caucuses and databases.

The token online democracy of Lansman's Momentum was designed precisely to suit its purpose – maintaining and mobilising electoral support for Corbyn's leadership under a thin veneer of 'movementism'. One of few avenues of influence available to Momentum members is the online petition – if more than 10% of Momentum members sign one, the proposal must go to an online ballot of all members. In summer 2018, a petition calling for Momentum to ballot its members to decide the organisation's Brexit policy ahead of the forthcoming party conference achieved the 10% threshold.

The NCG duly delayed the 'consultation' until after the party conference so it ran no risk of actually influencing events, ran a convoluted poll with bizarre option choices and leading questions, reported the results in a brazenly selective manner and proceeded to do nothing whatsoever about the outcome.

That this was the only actual vote on a policy issue to come from the members shows the merits of Momentum's 'grassroots democracy'. The total contempt for members' views displayed by the NCG on the single most important political issue of the Corbyn era demonstrates the shallowness of its commitment to even this charade.

Results & prospects

Five years on, it's clear that the strategy has failed. Not only did Corbyn lose two elections and forfeit left-wing leadership of the party, but there has been no lasting democratisation or transformation of Labour. Momentum failed to spur the party to capitalise on the enthusiasm of its members to win or even lead any major campaigns or struggles beyond hyper-local initiatives.

Now, in the absence of a unifying figure in the party leadership, and having done almost nothing to develop an independent political and organisational existence, the pro-Corbyn coalition embodied in Momentum has fragmented and threatens to disintegrate altogether. The impending realignment will be channelled most immediately through a debate about Momentum's future and the coming elections for its NCG.

Two broad trends have emerged. The first is the grouping of mainstream Corbyn ultra-loyalists, including members of the current NCG, one-time party staffers or Young Labour officials, backed by the editorship of Tribune magazine. The second is Forward Momentum, a new faction made up of former organisers of The World Transformed and somewhat more independent Corbyn supporters preferring a more horizontalist approach.

Forward Momentum has released a detailed proposal, while Tribune has so far published only a general reflection to coincide with the NCG statement calling for renewal. Neither group, however, has set out what distinguishes it from the other. Both factions are at pains to emphasise the broad orientation they agree on, acknowledging that Momentum became overly institutionalised, which ultimately backfired and stymied electoral victory. Both argue that we now need more democracy to restore the connection between the Labour left and 'movements outside parliament'.

This is correct, as far as it goes, but after the left's comprehensive defeat it would be very difficult for anyone to deny. Perhaps more indicative is the historic attitude of key activists in both groups. Many were already centrally involved in debates around Momentum's future in 2016-17; none spoke up against the Lansman coup. Some in the Tribune faction even actively supported Momentum's bureaucratisation and did much to encourage the bunker mentality and culture of leader-worship increasingly evident at successive party conferences.

In fact, the stated differences between the factions largely come down to cultural nuances which are more

a shibboleth than a meaningful distinction. Tribune speaks of a 'break with the London comfort zone' and a shift 'away from a narrow focus on the young and university-educated'. Forward Momentum speaks of internationalism, inclusivity, and liberation. These are coded hallmarks of the struggle between populist Lexiteers and 'new left'-style movementists for cultural hegemony within the left. Though the organisers' past positions on Brexit do not necessarily split neatly down the middle, the cultural and political signifiers attending the Brexit debate (internationalism vs left nationalism) are the clearest single issue mapping onto the split.

This distinction would undoubtedly take on significance if either group were to gain an opportunity for serious reorganisation or leadership of the movement. While neither group dares to mention the B-word, Johnson's government has already begun an all-out assault on migrants and the public sector. The left's attitude to freedom of movement and the implementation of the wholesale deregulation of the British economy in the name of Brexit is an essential question.

Nevertheless, each faction's attitude to these questions is nowhere spelled out. Momentum's aspiring leaders have correctly diagnosed the separation of the organised Labour left from the working class, yet they see the causes of defeat in cultural or organisational issues, and refuse to acknowledge the real failure – a series of political errors.

All the time that Momentum thought it was winning the battle against the right by consolidating its control of key committees and party posts, it was losing the war out in the real world. The triumph of Brexit, aided by a large chunk of Corbyn supporters, was the triumph of nationalist, chauvinist forces. Labour's inability to clearly define its opposition to this reactionary swindle of the working class and constant manoeuvring in the name of electoral calculus made people lose faith in the party as an insurgent social force.

To renew a connection between the Labour left and 'social movements' or 'community campaigns', Momentum will need to relate to the decisive struggles to come with a concrete set of policies. For this, democracy is necessary, but it cannot be seen as an end in itself. Democracy in any organisation is a commitment to allowing the full expression of members' interests, an assertion of the organisation's independence, a rejection of the sectional interests of any bureaucracy and those of considerations 'above' the rank and file. Organisational goals and structures condition each other, but in the final instance, democracy is simply a method for coming to conclusions on these questions and organising to take action.

Thus it is precisely the question of political objectives which the left must urgently answer, but that is the question which neither of the main Momentum factions is prepared to tackle.

What next?

The coronavirus pandemic has crashed the stock market and accelerated the onset of a global economic recession which threatens to dwarf the crisis of 2008. Millions have already been thrown out of work, and when the lockdown ends, the struggle to save the capitalist system and offload the costs of the crisis onto the backs of working people will begin.

To combat this crisis, the left has a series of urgent questions to answer. How should we oppose the government's mishandling of the pandemic, set out measures to protect the working class and make big business pay for the crisis it is responsible for? How should we prepare for the coming economic crisis and class struggles that it will throw up? What role is the Labour Party going to play in those struggles, and how can it be made into a vehicle of struggle for the working class? What is our ultimate goal – how do we define socialism?

The left needs to discuss these questions as quickly as possible, given the imminent crisis. There is no need for an extended consultation on how to democratise Momentum, which can only serve the purposes of further dither and delay. The new NCG should call a democratic members' and supporters' conference as quickly as possible to determine Momentum's priorities.

The experience of the last five years has been an intensive school for the British left in its task of recognising what it is fighting for and how it is going to achieve its goals. Here we outline five principles which should inform the development of Momentum's new strategy.

1. A class struggle strategy in the coronavirus crisis and coming recession

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the inability of the world's political and economic system – capitalism – to prevent, let alone solve the crises it generates. The economic paralysis will accelerate the onset of a global economic recession and intensify the mounting conflicts between the great powers.

The political strategy of reformism – a protracted campaign of concessions, compromise and negotiation within the logic of the capitalist system – is rendered irrelevant by the scale and severity of the challenges we face. In developing the means to combat both the Covid-19 crisis and the coming economic crash, we need a strategy that combines defence against the bosses' onslaught in the medium term with the struggle for workers' power and a socialist economy.

2. Democracy

The purpose of fighting for greater democracy in Labour is to allow the members to effectively oppose the bureaucracy and the incorrect, compromising policies of the leadership and the PLP. Therefore, as a principle in the struggle for socialism it is non-negotiable.

Our starting point must be to demand the full sovereignty of annual party conference to decide on its programme, on which election manifestos and the PLP's tactics should be based. Momentum must continue to fight for the implementation of all existing conference policy, for open selection of parliamentary candidates, councillors, mayors and other elected officials. It should also defend party members against unjust disciplinary processes.

An acid test for Momentum's readiness to fight for the democratic self-expression of the rank-and-file will be the long-overdue democratisation of its own internal regime.

3. Transform the trade unions

The political turn represented by the Corbyn movement had as its basis the failure of the trade unions to effectively oppose the coalition government's austerity programme. The political strategy of the professional bureaucratic caste, which runs the unions and bankrolls the Labour Party, is that of the mediator between capital and labour, i.e. the reformist, gradualist method of negotiation and compromise.

However, the influx of new members and discussion over the Labour Party largely bypassed the trade unions: a fatal mistake. The trade unions exercise their influence over the party – at all levels and in their own interests. Developing tactics to free the unions from the dead hand of the bureaucracy and replacing it with class struggle methods of organising the unorganised, winning better pay, and pursuing general political demands is a key objective for socialists inside or outside the Labour Party.

4. Internationalism

Migrants and ethnic minorities have been systematically scapegoated for the failure of capitalism to

provide security and prosperity for all. Socialists therefore have to campaign against racism in all its forms. All who want to live and work here should be welcome. Antiracism has to be universal and so opposition to antisemitism has to go alongside opposition to anti-Palestinian racism.

Only socialist measures and an international reorganisation of the economy can offer lasting solutions to the major political crises of our generation ? recurring economic crisis, climate change, the refugee crisis, new wars and health inequalities. Only an international socialist movement can provide the political leadership we need to resist a global system.

Any nationally-based movement fighting for socialism must prioritise building international links, organising solidarity with all workers? and democratic struggles around the world, and ultimately fighting to make the leap from expressions of solidarity with each other?s national struggles to structures for coordinating common action.

5. A fighting party

As we described previously, elections expose the balance of class forces, giving a snapshot of the class struggle. A rising tide of class struggle is therefore not only beneficial, but probably essential to the election of a left Labour government. And the continuation of the Labour Party to that struggle is certainly necessary for any left Labour government to surmount the sabotage of the bosses and their state machinery.

The left needs to fight to turn Labour into a party of struggle rather than merely an electoralist machine. There should be no privileges for MPs, councillors and party ? or trade union ? functionaries. On the contrary, those at the forefront of the struggle should replace those who cannot place the cause for socialism above their personal careers.

Conclusion

The potential of the Corbyn movement was not just in its promise to shift the party?s manifesto policies to the left, but in the historic opportunity to disrupt and break from the right-wing pro-capitalist elements which control the Labour Party.

This is the task which the Labour left must now take up again. The party bureaucracy, the trade union bureaucracy and the vast majority of their elected officials and staff are a millstone around the neck of the working class, whenever it confronts its own fate, regardless of whether the bureaucracy has a ?left? or ?right? character.

The failures of Corbynism and Starmer?s decisive victory should put paid to any remaining illusions in the possibility of peaceful, gradual, democratic ? or bureaucratic ? transformation of the Labour Party from electoral routinism in the parliamentary system to a weapon in the hands of workers in the struggle for socialism.

Economic crisis and climate emergency will pose existential questions for capitalism in the coming months. The struggles over what measures to take, in whose interest they are taken and who will pay for them are one part of a bigger struggle over how society uses its wealth and which class rules.

Only anti-capitalist solutions can offer a roadmap to a future based on human solidarity and social equality. To avoid demoralisation and disarray, the left needs to seize the opportunity presented by these historic crises and build an organisation prepared to get involved in many different methods of struggle,

increasingly outside of the electoral arena. Most importantly, we need an organisation clear about its goal ? to protect working class interests, defeat the capitalist offensive and wage the struggle for power.

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