

UK: Keir Starmer declares war on the Left

Dave Stockton, redflagonline Fri, 03/07/2020 - 09:22

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By Dave Stockton

Sir Keir Starmer's sudden sacking of Rebecca Long-Bailey from the Labour shadow cabinet is a declaration of war on the left within the party. It is part and parcel of his courting of the Tory and the Liberal press which in return has been flattering him as a real statesman on account of his minimal opposition to Boris Johnson over the latter's massively incompetent handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

His brutal dismissal of RLB is intended to cow the left - probably still the majority of party members. Doubtless he believes it is too demoralised after the 'catastrophic defeat' in December to put up much of a fight. Alternatively, he may hope to provoke a conflict whilst the party branches are in lockdown and conference prorogued indefinitely. In any case Starmer will hardly worry if his actions speed the exit from the party of the hundreds of thousands who joined under Corbyn.

In this connection, Rebecca Long-Bailey's opposition to Starmer leading the charge to end the lockdown by bullying the teaching unions into accepting schools reopening is no insignificant factor. Like Blair and Miliband before him, Starmer knows that the key to demonstrating his 'credibility' is to assert his independence from the trade unions. He has started this by picking on a smaller union, and one which is not affiliated to Labour.

But if the affiliated unions continue to open their chequebooks when needed, then the new normal will be the old normal of the 30 years before Corbyn. However, Starmer a man who, despite his distinguished career in the law, has even shallower roots in the labour movement than Neil Kinnock, Tony Blair or Gordon Brown, may just have miscalculated. Like many right-wingers he easily forgets that there is a class struggle outside the tempests in the parliamentary teapot.

The task of the left is to show him in no uncertain terms that indeed he has badly miscalculated. This involves not just a robust reply to Starmer and his acolytes and their continued branding of antiracists as racists, but a pugnacious response by the whole labour movement to the coming wave of mass unemployment and renewed austerity from Johnson and the employers.

We have a leader who will hardly dare desert the dispatch box for the platform of mass demonstrations let alone picket lines. The MPs of the Socialist Campaign Group and the rank and file in the constituencies, the affiliated unions and Momentum must campaign against a leader who wants to put the clock back to before 2015.

'I've made it my first priority to tackle anti-Semitism and rebuilding trust with the Jewish community is a number one priority for me.' - Starmer

Rebecca Long Bailey signed the Board of Deputies 10-point pledge during the leadership campaign and

even called herself a Zionist at a Jewish Labour Movement hustings. Perhaps she thought this would protect her against the vile abuse that Jeremy Corbyn and many others were subjected to. It bought her no protection whatsoever.

Starmer was her judge, jury and executioner. His sentence was:

?The sharing of that article was wrong? because the article contained anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and I have therefore stood Rebecca Long-Bailey down from the shadow cabinet.?

In fact by no stretch of the imagination could RLB?s tweet, praising an interview in The Independent by Maxine Peake, be described as approving anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. In the interview Peake did say:

?Systemic racism is a global issue? The tactics used by the police in America, kneeling on George Floyd?s neck, that was learnt from seminars with Israeli secret services.?

This was factually mistaken, though the mistake was originally Peake?s not RLB?s, and even The Independent published the interview citing an Amnesty International report as corroboration of the claim. The Independent later corrected its article admitting, ?Our article also implied that this training could have included neck kneeling tactics.?

Nevertheless, while it cannot be proved that the US police ?learnt? this particular tactic from the Israeli state forces, we do know that both use them regularly against unarmed civilians in the subjugation of racial minorities. The point is not whether this or that particular method is used, but the wider point about the institutional relationship and mutual architecture of terror used by two police forces to repress racially and democratically oppressed populations. What is certain is that anyone who objects to drawing attention to the Israeli state?s treatment of the Palestinians is playing into the hands of violent racists.

RLB insisted that her tweet was in any case not an endorsement of this claim but of the main thrust of the interview, which was supporting Corbyn?s political legacy to Labour and to urge members not to leave the party.

In short Starmer?s reasons for sacking RLB were unjust and his remarks about Maxime Peake?s interview positively libellous. The truth is that opponents of Israel?s crimes against the dispossessed Palestinian people are being subjected to a concerted campaign to silence them by accusing them of the foul ideology of antisemitism. The Labour right has cynically seized on this to smear their left wing opponents, softening up the membership and public opinion for a purge.

Their real objective is to suppress criticism in Britain of the Israeli state?s apartheid policy and the BDS campaign, modelled on that against racist South Africa. The UK like the USA is a decisive battleground for this struggle because of the long term dependency of the Zionist project first on British colonialism and then as the guard dog for US imperialism?s economic and military assets in the Middle East.

Ridding Labour of Corbyn?s legacy

Related to this, and the main cause of the determination of the entire British media and political establishment to get rid of Corbyn, was his magnificent record of opposition to the many imperialist wars, bombings and occupations from Argentina to south-eastern Europe, the Middle East and Central Asia. This included his willingness to give critical support to people in the so-called third world fighting US and UK imperialism ? in Vietnam, Chile, Ireland, Nicaragua, Venezuela and of course Palestine and the Middle East.

This earned him the slander that he supported terrorists. In doing so, however, he never budged from his advocacy of peaceful and democratic methods. He was and is no revolutionary but a principled and courageous reformist and "peacemonger". But that alone was enough to disqualify him from entering Number 10.

Within a week of Corbyn becoming Labour leader, The Sunday Times quoted a "senior serving general" who said the armed forces would take "direct action" to stop a Corbyn government – an event which would effectively be a mutiny. This was followed by a series of stories in The Daily Telegraph, The Times, The Daily Mail, and The Sun, quoting former or current members of the army, navy and special forces, as well as MI5, MI6 and an ex-senior civil servant. There were some 440 articles mentioning Corbyn as a "threat to national security".

No surprise then that Corbyn did not have a security clearance from the "deep" or "permanent" state, i.e. the real "conspirators" hiding behind the velvet curtains of British parliamentarism. At the same time, in contrast to every other Labour leader since the war, was his support for every major and many minor strike and struggle by workers to save their jobs, public services, wages and trade union rights.

The ruling class has nothing like this to fear from the Right Honourable Sir Keir Starmer, KCB, QC, MP, who had a blameless (from their point of view) five years as Director of the Crown Prosecution Service. Here he refused to let the policeman concerned be prosecuted for the "unlawful killing" of Ian Tomlinson during a 2009 anti-G20 demonstration in the City and urged the more determined prosecution of benefit cheats, at a time when tax evaders were running free.

The main charge we in the rank and file of the Labour Party have to make against Jeremy Corbyn is that he did not go anywhere near far enough to empower the rank and file. In reality he and his circle of advisers shied away from leading the membership into a struggle for democratic control over the Parliamentary Labour Party, the Victoria Street party functionaries, the councillors and the mayors. Apart from the 2017 and 2019 manifestos that have already gone into the recycling bin, the political results are meagre indeed.

The left gains were mainly thanks to the leader's prerogative to set policy, a power invested in the role created by Blair, Brown and Miliband, never dreaming that these powers would ever fall into the wrong hands. As for the formal structures of party democracy, only late in the day did the annual conference and the National Executive achieve some influence.

The truth of the Corbyn "experiment" is that the pro-capitalist Labour and trade union bureaucracy will never allow "their" party to be peacefully "democratically" or even bureaucratically "transformed" into a fighting party of the working class, one which necessarily means an internationalist party that stands with oppressed peoples everywhere and fights against imperialism and exploitation around the world.

Starmer is doing everything in his power to prove himself a safe pair of hands for British imperialism and consequently its ally in the Middle East. Team Starmer are launching an all-out struggle aimed at discrediting socialist, internationalist ideas and turning Labour back into a "loyal opposition" – loyal to British capitalism – and one which harnesses the labour movement to the yoke of class collaboration.

We must protest Starmer's sacking of RLB and demand her reinstatement with a full and humble apology. We must stop the witch-hunt of anti-Zionists, which is the prelude to a wider offensive on everything positive that remains of the Corbyn legacy.

We must build a powerful united front of the Labour left not afraid to oppose Starmer as robustly as the

right did Corbyn ? albeit with principled political arguments, not dirty rumours and slander campaigns. The stormy class struggles that will break forth as the Tories try to make workers pay for the coronavirus crisis and the impending great recession, all added to by the madness of Brexit, will demand a political leadership unafraid of denouncing the new right leaders of the Labour Party when it hesitates or denounces the resistance.

The months and years of struggle ahead will not be easy ones for Sir Keir and his witch-hunters. We should not be frightened for a minute by his threats and persecutions ? defiance not compliance should be our attitude.

This struggle must be the basis for drawing the conclusions of the Corbyn years and renewing the fight for a genuine socialist, internationalist and anti-imperialist working class party.

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