



# UK: Labour in crisis over repression of Corbyn supporters

Dave Stockton Tue, 01/12/2020 - 22:52

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On 29 October 2020, Jeremy Corbyn, Labour Leader from September 2015 to April 2020, was suspended from party membership and had his membership of the Parliamentary Labour Party withdrawn. The action was taken by the Party's unelected General Secretary, David Evans, in collusion with the party's leader Keir Starmer. The pretext given was Corbyn's response to the publication of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission's October 2020 report into the Labour Party's handling of antisemitism under his leadership. He had stated;

‘One antisemite is one too many, but the scale of the problem was also dramatically overstated for political reasons by our opponents inside and outside the party, as well as by much of the media. While I do not accept all of (the EHRC's) findings, I trust its recommendations will be swiftly implemented to help move on from this period.’

The Report itself did not find Corbyn responsible for any of the antisemitic incidents, nor did it find them to be widespread, despite the claims of prominent right wing and pro-Israel Labour MPs, plus the chief Rabbi and the Board of Deputies who, in any case, cannot be said to represent the whole Jewish community – not the ultra orthodox, the liberal synagogues or many secular and socialist Jews.

The Labour Party NEC set up a panel to consider Corbyn's suspension from the party, which rapidly restored his full membership. Uproar resulted from Tory and liberal media, the right wing MPs and the Board of Deputies. PLP members threatened to resign from the party. Then the party General Secretary, supported by Starmer, announced that Corbyn would not be restored to membership of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

Evans, a veteran of Tony Blair's New Labour regime, last week ordered constituency parties not to discuss Corbyn's suspension on pain of disciplinary action. Yet Starmer himself, and right wing MPs and leading figures in the Shadow Cabinet, have loudly and publicly supported the decision. Local parties, however, are denied the same right – and have effectively been gagged. Where constituency parties, such as Bristol West, have discussed the treatment of Corbyn, their elected officers have been suspended by unelected national and regional party bureaucrats.

This new clampdown on members' rights has already provoked a further backlash. The neighbouring CLP of Bristol North West similarly defied Evans' orders and passed a motion criticising Corbyn's suspension as ‘divisive, demoralising and wrong’, continuing that it would ‘weaken our Party when we need to be strong to resist the harm that Tory policies are doing to millions of people’.

Other constituency and branch Labour parties around the UK are passing more and more motions supporting Jeremy Corbyn or condemning, or even voting outright no confidence in, Keir Starmer and David Evans. Others are being blocked from doing so by anti-democratic interventions by regional officers.

Fourteen members of Labour's 39-member National Executive Committee (NEC) have written an open letter condemning both David Evans and Keir Starmer.

## Background

As soon as Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader, a coalition of forces, the old Tony Blair far right wing plus the so-called centre-left of the party for whom it was an article of faith that a left leadership could never win an election because of

media hostility, set out to 'correct' the membership's choice. Forcing a new leadership election in 2016 they were roundly trounced once again. That was when the campaign to smear and discredit Corbyn really got underway.

Knowing his long identification with the defence of Palestinian rights, and opposition to Britain and the USA's imperialist wars, they targeted him as an antisemite and a racist. In fact, Corbyn has probably the longest and most consistent record of active opposition to all forms of racism and fascism of all Labour MPs going back to the 1970s.

Soon, the coalition of anti-Corbyn forces were targeting the whole Corbyn movement, which had increased Labour's membership from 190,000 to 550,000, making it the largest left wing party in Europe. A handful of Jewish MPs, who were long time Israel supporters, claimed to be the victims of 'left antisemites' without little or no evidence. They claimed that if Labour were elected, Jewish people would be in physical danger and would have to flee the country. All this was magnified by television programmes like the infamous July 2019 Panorama broadcast, and daily propaganda in the Tory tabloids and the liberal Guardian. Prominent black activists, and Jewish anti-Zionists, were targeted and suspended or expelled.

The problem was that Corbyn and his team of advisers, and Jon Lansman, the owner of the Momentum franchise, refused to stand up to this onslaught. They let their supporters be hounded out of the party. Why? Because they feared any fightback would lead to the exit of right wing MPs before the election and thus doom the prospect of a Corbyn government.

In fact, five did leave, but their 'party' soon disappeared. What all this revealed was that the project of the reformist Labour left requires maintaining a block with the Labour right - in this case the great majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party. The strategic problem with this is that the right has no need of the left, since they represent the agency of the bourgeoisie within the Labour Party, normally, indeed, its unquestioned leadership.

Given the paucity of the 'evidence' referred to in the EHRC Report, mainly Facebook posts and tweets, without proof that the people who authored them were even LP members, it is an outrage that the investigation was not into the egregious slander campaign and the sabotage from the party bureaucracy at Labour HQ.

A report by the minority of Corbyn supporters who worked at Victoria Street Southside records the horrendous bullying they were subjected to by the anti-Corbyn bureaucracy, plus the outright sabotage of Corbyn's leadership and the 2017 election campaign. This was suppressed and had to be leaked because the party leadership failed to do anything about it.

Corbyn opened the way to this defeat not only by his disastrous mishandling of the political crisis over Brexit in 2018-19, his failure to fight the bogus antisemitism campaign and his failure to let the membership thoroughly democratise the party, but by resigning after the 2019 defeat and opening the way to Starmer.

Momentum under Lansman also contributed to disaster by blocking its development into a genuinely autonomous organisation of the rank and file membership. Instead, they made it little more than a cheerleader for Corbyn and McDonnell. As a result, when Corbyn resigned, a big minority of his supporters voted for Starmer. The left MPs then adopted a polite supportive position to the new leader as parliamentary protocol suggested.

The struggle goes on

Despite the repression aimed at the membership in the branches, the number of condemnatory resolutions has continued to rise. In addition, several senior trade union leaders including Len McCluskey of Unite, the largest single donor to the party, have protested in the strongest terms seen for many years. He referred to Starmer's de facto reversal of the NEC panel's unanimous restoration of Corbyn's membership as 'a vindictive and vengeful action which despoils democracy', as 'capitulating to outside pressures', and as launching a 'witch hunt'. 14 members of the NEC signed a statement rejecting these actions. Subsequently, 13 of them left the NEC meeting when Margaret Beckett, rather than Ian Murray of the FBU, was elected as that body's chair.

The suspensions of CLP officers who rightly disregarded the ban on party members discussing events of this magnitude testifies to the existence of a leadership determined to impose a bureaucratic dictatorship over the party. Given the

absence of a conference until at least September 2021, the lockdown until March at least, the 'purdah' during the May 2021 local elections and the regional officers running wild, it is clearly necessary for the rank and file to take control. They should defy the totally undemocratic instructions and ensure the continued functioning of branches, constituency parties, young labour branches etc. together with the local liaison committees with affiliated trade unions.

It is the duty of every branch and constituency party, every affiliated union at national and branch level, not only to refuse to comply with the bureaucracy in Victoria Street but to call for an emergency party conference to reverse all measures taken against Corbyn or the left, to censure the leader (and press for a new leadership election) and remove David Evans from his post. The party's general secretary, and all leading regional officials, should be elected, not appointed. Since Starmer now has a majority on the NEC, the resistance will need to call their own conference, not only to resist Starmer's coup against the membership but to adopt a fighting plan of action against the Tories and the mass unemployment that the economic and covid crises have unleashed.

A democratic party of the working class has to be a militant party of the class struggle. Where branches and constituency parties are suspended, they should at once organise with affiliated union branches and Trade Union Councils to prepare such a conference and to engage in the class struggle against the Tories ? on unemployment etc. The Socialist Campaign Group MPs should form their own group in parliament with Jeremy Corbyn as an honoured member.

If this coup by the right wing PLP, the leader and the head of the party bureaucracy against the individual membership and the majority of the trade unions, is allowed to stand, it will be a final and historic defeat not only for Corbyn but the entire Labour left.

But the battle is not yet over, largely because the right insisted on breaking Corbyn and purging his supporters. They pressured Starmer to use the EHRC report to humiliate and gag the left. A deal negotiated with the unions broke down when Starmer refused to reinstate Corbyn in the Parliamentary Party, under pressure from the Jewish Labour Movement and the Board of Deputies.

The outrage at Starmer's actions presents the opportunity to counterattack. But this requires the unity of all those who do not accept unity with Starmer as either desirable or possible. In fact, it means setting the goal of a veritable revolution in Labour, the dissolution of the unelected party bureaucracy, the putting of the PLP and the councils under the discipline of bodies elected by the rank and file members in the branches and in the affiliated unions, too. Last but not least it means throwing the party into the class struggle against mass unemployment, against privatisation, against the entire Tory attack on the welfare state.

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