

International Bolshevik Tendency

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PUT LABOUR TO THE TEST!

ANTISEMITISM, SMEARS & SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

As British voters first heard the news of a snap election called to resolve the Brexit stalemate, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn declared: “We will now launch the most ambitious and radical campaign for real change our country has ever seen”. The party’s manifesto (labour.org.uk/manifesto) promises an end to the hated and inefficient Universal Credit system and the benefit cap, a shorter working week with no loss in pay, increased trade-union rights, no zero-hours contracts, higher taxes on the wealthy, free broadband, a minimum wage of £10 per hour, increased public sector pay, free education from early years to university and beyond, increases in the availability of social housing, nationalisation

of “rail, mail, water and energy”, increased funding and an end to privatisation in the NHS, free prescriptions and dental checks, free care for the elderly and massive investment in a “Green Industrial Revolution” to reduce carbon emissions while creating jobs, services and infrastructure.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson calls Corbyn a Marxist. Far from it. But his policies, the most left-wing talk we have heard from a Labour leader in a generation, are aimed at the grotesque inequalities and injustices of capitalism. To implement them would mean a substantial transfer of wealth from the rich to the poor and improvements in the lives of millions of workers. Con-



trary to the bourgeois press, from the liberal Guardian to the far-right flirting *Daily Mail*, these are the issues that matter to working people in Britain. Ground down by years of austerity and outright contempt from the Tories and Blair's Labour, many working-class voters see a Labour government under Corbyn as their only hope for a decent future and, however they voted in the 2016 Brexit referendum, perhaps a way out of the endless debate over whether their oppression is best carried out inside or outside the European Union (see "The Devil or the Deep Blue Sea? Neither the EU nor Nationalist Poison", bolshevik.org).

We will be casting a vote for Labour on 12 December 2019 alongside a substantial proportion of the British working class. We do so as a tactical approach to promoting a revolutionary socialist programme against illusions in the existing mechanisms of bourgeois democracy (see "Marxism & Bourgeois Elections", bolshevik.org). Our critical support to Labour is bound up with a reassertion of the lessons of history: social democracy, relying on reforms within the confines of capitalism, does not work to fully promote the interests of the working class. Labour's political programme would not fundamentally alter the social and economic foundations of a system that exploits and oppresses the majority of the population. To dismantle the wealth disparities and misery produced by capitalism and put the welfare of the planet and its people over the pursuit of profit, the working class must mobilise for fundamental change – a historic shift in the mode of production made possible by the revolutionary transfer of power to the working class. Rather than a system promoting the interests of the owners of capital over those who need to work to survive, we must move to one based on the collectively planned use of the world's resources to create a sustainable and equitable society.

No to Cross-Class Coalitions!

The outcome of this election is unpredictable, due in part to the distorting effect of Brexit on standard voting patterns. Some kind of hung parliament is a strong possibility. If Labour wins but without an overall majority, there will be intense pressure, from inside and outside the party, to form a "progressive alliance" with small

capitalist parties. Corbyn's own inclinations are against this: "I am not doing deals. I am not doing coalitions" (inews.co.uk, 20 September 2019). He is backed up by the shadow chancellor, John McDonnell: "We would run a minority government. We'd implement the policies and we'd expect the other parties to support them. If they didn't, well, we'll go back to the people. Look, who wouldn't vote for a £10 living wage?" (*Guardian*, 31 October 2019).

Corbyn and McDonnell recognise that any coalition means compromise and that their support base does not trust parties such as the Scottish Nationalists (SNP), Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru or Greens, which can talk left on social issues but have shown in practice their contempt for the poor and vulnerable. The Lib Dems, Plaid Cymru and Greens have been prioritising membership of the EU over all else, forming a "Remain" alliance to stand down for each other in key seats – mainly to the benefit of the Lib Dems. Meanwhile, the SNP hopes to gain enough seats and parliamentary clout to negotiate a deal for another referendum on Scottish independence.

For Marxists, any alliance of a working-class party with bourgeois parties crosses a definitive line. In such circumstances, even the most limited expression of independent working-class politics is suppressed, and any reformist party advocating such a coalition is not worthy of even the most critical vote.

Bread and roses?

The Labour manifesto has watered down several more radical policies passed by the membership, including at the September 2019 conference. It does not promise to repeal all the laws that restrict trade union rights, abolish private schools, extend free movement or aim to achieve zero net carbon emissions by 2030. Even so, the chances of the full election manifesto being implemented are extremely slim. Should Labour establish either a majority or minority government, it will be held back by the leadership's unwillingness to threaten capitalism and by capital's unwillingness to let it.

In these circumstances, the expectations of those who voted and campaigned for a Labour victory will be huge. Labour-led councils have largely been implement-

ing Tory austerity for the past decade, claiming that the budgets they are assigned enable them to do little else. With Labour in central government, this reasoning disappears and Labour voters will expect local services to be restored, expanded and adequately funded. Repairing the crippling damage done to provision of, for example, childcare, youth services, social housing, fire services and mental health care is no small task. Once in power, McDonnell will discover that his Treasury is not as well-stocked as expected and that his tax revenues fall as capital moves abroad and finds other ways to avoid funding services for the working class. The manifesto promise to “rewrite the rules of the economy, so that it works for everyone” is simply not possible under capitalism, the system whose basic framework the Labour leadership will never challenge.

There will also be expectations of an immediate increase in civil liberties, particularly for racial minorities. Already there are clear signs of looming disappointment in Labour’s inclusion of the racist police force and border control within the general remit of “public services”, criticising Tory cuts to both. Impossibly, the manifesto claims that while Labour will “invest in policing” and increase frontline forces, it will somehow make cops no longer racist:

“We will work to eliminate institutional biases against BAME communities. Proportionate stop-and-search based on intelligence is a needed tool of effective policing, but the use of expanded powers means black and Asian men are still more likely to be stopped and searched, poisoning relations between the police and the local communities they serve.”

Police racism is not a bug but a feature, a fundamental role it plays in defending private property and the rule of capitalist law. Labour’s promises to “make our communities safer” will change nothing for working-class black and Asian youth disproportionately subject to stop and search, nor will they do anything for the families of those killed in custody or for those who have been attacked while exercising the democratic right to protest.

Even more indicative of the inevitable betrayal are the attempts to demonstrate that Labour’s policies

are “fully costed”, as outlined in a 40-page document, “Funding Real Change”. This companion piece to the manifesto sets forth a “Fiscal Credibility Rule” which includes a promise “To eliminate the current budget deficit by the end of the rolling five-year forecast period of the Office for Budget Responsibility”.

This, like Corbyn’s message to the capitalist club gathered at the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) conference that he is not “anti-business”, is about reassuring the ruling class that it fundamentally need not worry. Nonetheless, workers and capitalists alike are anticipating that a Corbyn government will take a big chunk out of the bank accounts of the rich. The *Guardian* (2 November 2019), after speaking to lawyers and accountants for the wealthy, concluded that: “The super-rich are preparing to immediately leave the UK if Jeremy Corbyn becomes prime minister, fearing they will lose billions of pounds if the Labour leader does ‘go after’ the wealthy elite with new taxes, possible capital controls and a clampdown on private schools” (*Guardian*, 2 November 2019). The *Financial Times* (22 November 2019) describes the manifesto as “a recipe for terminal economic decline”.

Getting rid of poverty and inequality will only be achieved by taking wealth from the capitalists on a scale that goes well beyond increased tax rates on higher incomes. Yet Corbyn and McDonnell are not even prepared to threaten expropriation of the core industries of capitalism. They know that doing so would encourage militant picket lines, fighting on the streets and a fundamental challenge to the false democracy of parliament in which they have put their faith.

Despite this acquiescence to the established order, the ruling class has been attempting to get rid of Corbyn ever since he became Labour leader, often with help from inside the party itself. David Blunkett, who held several portfolios in Tony Blair’s government, recently took to the front page of the *Telegraph* (8 November 2019) to declare his “despair” at “the behaviour of the hard left within the Labour party – the antisemitism, the thuggery, the irrational views on security and international issues”.

One of Corbyn’s most noticeable retreats is on his lifetime of opposition to nuclear weapons. Although

the manifesto talks of aiming for a nuclear-free world, in the meantime “Labour supports the renewal of the Trident nuclear deterrent” and “will maintain our commitment to NATO”. Despite these concessions to the continued rule of British imperialism, the prospect of a Labour government under Corbyn appears to disturb the ruling class so much that some top elements of the armed forces have suggested that they might feel compelled to prevent it. The putschist solution has even been hinted at by Liberal-Democrat leader Jo Swinson, who declared Corbyn to be a “threat to national security” (*Scotsman*, 5 November 2019).

Well before it comes to this, it is likely that the Labour leadership will jettison many of its proposed reforms in order to stay in power.

Crying Wolf

In collaboration with the media, Corbyn’s opponents inside and outside the Labour party have sought to discredit him with a number of criticisms (divisive, misogynist, old, badly dressed, distracted by his allotment or even a terrorist sympathiser). None of this has been very successful, except the bogus claim that the left of the Labour Party is “rife with antisemitism”, encouraged, or at least tolerated, by Corbyn himself. Eager activists on the Labour right have spent hundreds of hours combing through Corbyn’s history as a backbench MP, with every careless remark analysed, exaggerated and often deliberately misrepresented. Failure to mention antisemitism in a review of Hobson’s Imperialism and failure to notice antisemitic imagery in a photo of a mural (followed by an apology when drawn to his attention) are both cited as conscious endorsement.

This smear campaign works on the “throw enough mud” principle. Hundreds of complaints of antisemitism have been received by Labour’s central office, the majority of which turn out not to be against Labour members at all. The press have played along, writing headlines like “Corbyn’s anti-semitic army” (*Times*, 7 April 2019) or “Jews will leave if Corbyn wins” (*Sunday Telegraph*, 3 November 2019).

One of the leading organisations spreading this

smear is the explicitly Zionist Jewish Labour Movement, which claims to represent all Jews in the Labour Party. It has recently declared it will only support very select Labour candidates in the election, as “a culture of antisemitism has been allowed to emerge and fester in the Party at all levels” (LabourList, 31 October 2019). A prominent figure is John Mann, who as a Labour MP fronted a biased episode of the BBC’s flagship news programme Panorama attacking Corbyn for antisemitism, then resigned to move to the House of Lords and a position as Johnson’s “antisemitism tsar”.

The campaign has claimed some prominent Labour scalps, notably former London mayor Ken Livingstone, who pointed out that for a time in the 1930s Zionists and Nazis agreed on wanting Jews to move to Palestine – a historical fact he clumsily accompanied by saying that Hitler “went mad and ended up killing six million Jews”. This led to his suspension from the party and eventual resignation. Black Jewish activist Jackie Walker has also been targeted, as have other Jewish Labour members for refusing to support Zionism.

The Labour left is forced into a Catch-22 situation. Promises to address the issue of antisemitism in the party are read as an admission that it is indeed a major problem disproportionate to the incidence of antisemitism in society at large. Attempts to deny or downplay either the general problem or specific accusations are themselves seen as yet more evidence of antisemitism.

This is the scenario faced by Derby North MP Chris Williamson, who was suspended from the party in February after making this statement at a meeting in his constituency:

“The party that has done more to stand up to racism is now being demonised as a racist, bigoted party. I have got to say I think our party’s response has been partly responsible for that because in my opinion... we have backed off too much, we have given too much ground, we have been too apologetic.” (inews.co.uk, 28 June 2019)

Williamson has a point – the Labour leadership has failed to defend Livingstone and others falsely accused of antisemitism, taking the road of apology rath-

er than pointing out from the beginning that this was clearly a smear campaign. That Williamson is barred from standing as a Labour candidate in this election only indicates again how quickly the leadership capitulates to its right-wing critics.

Like any form of racism, the rare cases of antisemitism that do exist in the party should be fought, but that can't be achieved by seeing antisemitism where none exists. The organisation Jewish Voice for Labour, proving that Jews in the Labour Party (or society at large) are not one unified "community", put it well:

"Williamson based his statement on the official statistics published by the General Secretary of the Party, Jennie Formby. They confirm that over the last 10 months complaints received led to 453 cases being investigated for antisemitism. This represents 1/12th of 1% of the membership. There is no wave of antisemitism in the Party.

"The existence of antisemitism in the Party, as everywhere in society, is not in doubt. It needs to be contested, and the Party's beefed up disciplinary processes are doing just that. But these figures, and the experience of the hundreds of our Jewish members in the Labour Party, give the lie to the false narrative that the Party is rife with antisemitism. Such a description bears no resemblance to reality.

"The flood of exaggerated claims of antisemitism make it harder to deal with any real instances of antisemitism. The credibility of well-founded allegations is undermined by the less credible ones and real perpetrators are more likely not to be held to account. Crying wolf is dangerous when there are real wolves around the corner."

(jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk, 27 February 2019)

Antisemitism, Islamophobia and other forms of racism have been growing in recent years, alongside a rightward shift in the political terrain and the resurgence of far-right and fascist movements, some of which directly channel Nazi antisemitism of the 1930s. All working-class militants should defend Jews, Muslims and any ethnic/religious groups against threats of violence and attacks. Combating antisemitism is an in-

tegral part of fighting fascism and racism in society at large.

One of Labour's capitulations in the face of these attacks is the adoption of the definition of antisemitism promoted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), along with examples that equate antisemitism with criticism of Israel, specifically prohibiting the phrase "Israel is a racist endeavour".

Israel is a racist endeavour – an apartheid state in which Palestinians are second-class citizens. Founded to provide a home country for one particular religious/national grouping on territory already occupied by others, based on discriminatory laws, it is analogous to apartheid South Africa, or the South of the U.S. under the Jim Crow laws. Non-Jews are denied civil rights on a scale that cannot be described as anything other than racist.

Much of what has been labelled "left-wing antisemitism" is legitimate criticism of Israel. However, the left is not immune from a tendency to equate the Zionist state with all Jews, whether in Israel or elsewhere, and to ignore or play down class divisions within the Israeli population and Jewish communities worldwide. Many ostensibly socialist groups are soft on nationalist movements, moving beyond necessary solidarity in fighting oppression to support for political programmes that promote not class struggle but the interests of the national bourgeoisie. In this scenario, class lines disappear and the key division is wrongly presented as that between the Palestinians as the oppressed people and the Jewish Israelis as the oppressors. In the British left there is often a similar cultural distaste for Irish Protestants, again not recognising a class-divided community.

There is no fundamental solution to national oppression under capitalism while two intermingled peoples seek self-determination on the same land. In such scenarios, it is necessary to overthrow the existing capitalist state and build a state run by the working class with equitable treatment for both groups and access to land and wealth managed for the benefit of all. The precondition for achieving that is joint class struggle led by a party comprising both Palestinian and Jewish workers who fight Palestinian oppression as part of a broader struggle to destroy the capitalist Israeli state

and establish a bi-national workers' state for Jews, Palestinians and any others who live in the region (see "Israeli Apartheid & Palestinian Oppression", bolshevik.org).

One of the accusations against Corbyn is that he has shared a platform with supporters of Hamas at Palestinian solidarity events and called them "friends". In defence of Palestinian civilians against the military of the Israeli state, Marxists may well find conjunctural shared objectives with Hamas, what we call a military bloc. Crucially, this should never entail support to Hamas's political programme, which can only lead the Palestinians into a nationalist and religious dead end. Corbyn and the Palestinian solidarity movement in general are not always clear about this distinction. But that does not make him an antisemite.

Afraid of being called racist, the Labour leadership has fallen into a trap that has been set for the left. The antisemitism smears are a pernicious and extremely effective campaign, becoming nastier as the election date approaches. Despite his conciliation, Corbyn and the left must be defended against these attacks. The Labour Party is certainly not free of racism, including antisemitism, but it is far from a defining feature of the party. A far greater concern in this respect is a tendency to softness towards doorstep fears of "migrants taking our jobs", such as Emily Thornberry's recent assurances of "fair rules and managed migration" that would be implemented by a post-Brexit Labour government: "We heard people when they said one of the reasons that they voted for Brexit was because of unrestricted levels of immigration" (*Guardian*, 11 November 2019).

Any individual cases within the Labour Party are dwarfed by increasing antisemitism and Islamophobia coming from the right, including attacks on individuals and secular and religious buildings associated with these communities. The "Labour antisemitism" moral panic

must be understood as the double-edged attack it really is: first, an opportunist assault on a movement seen as a problem for the British ruling class, and, second, a defence of the foreign policy of British imperialism and its allies, who find it convenient to support a Zionist apartheid state in the Middle East.

Vote Labour! Break with Reformism!

While these attacks from the right are devised in fear of a perceived threat to capitalism, it is clear that Labour is not in fact a real danger to the established order. We call for critical support to the Corbyn-led Labour Party because we share the desire for a "radical campaign for real change" with the tens of thousands of activists fighting for a Labour victory and dispirited working-class voters who finally see some hope emerging. In 2017, this led to a surge in the Labour vote that surprised almost everyone, although it was not enough to put Corbyn in Downing Street. This has left millions still believing that "getting the Tories out" is the solution to the crisis facing Britain today.

Whether Labour loses the election under the pressure of relentless media attacks or wins and fails to meet the expectations of its voters, revolutionaries must argue the truth: that any campaign for real change, real distribution of wealth, cannot confine itself to the boundaries of parliament and capitalism. We must defend, in workplaces and on the streets, any material gains achieved under this system, but we must fight for so much more. Putting our hope in a party that advocates fiscally responsible "socialism" is the road to defeat. The people who learn that lesson from this election will be vital to the kind of party we need to build – a communist party that can lead the working class to take power in its own hands, expropriate capitalist wealth to fund services and infrastructure, and seize the means of production to build a better world for the benefit of all.