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Britain

New Left party – an historic opportunity?

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An assesement of the opportunities opened by the launch of the new left party by former Labour MPs [Zarah Sultana](#) and [Jeremy Corbyn](#).

Every time I start this article, I must keep updating the numbers who have signed up at the [Your Party website](#). According to Zarah Sultana's twitter feed we have already hit 500,000 in less than a week and people keep signing. This is the topic on everyone's lips at the demos and pickets for Palestine or to defend migrants.

Yes, the comparison with registered members of Labour and Reform is not fair since this is not yet a paying membership although it would be interesting to see how many have already donated.

We also remember the 300,000 who signed up for the [Enough is Enough campaign](#) launched by union leaders during the big public sector strikes a few years ago. The people behind that campaign had no project, there were a few one-off rallies with platform speakers and the thing rapidly evaporated. This is different.

People are signing up to a [Statement](#) that includes a number of general political positions reflective of the Corbyn project and a commitment in support of Palestine. The statement could be much better on ecology, although it does include criticism of fossil fuel companies destroying the planet.

Also included in the statement is a clear indication that there will be a founding conference and that members would decide on policies and leaders. People here are signing up for a whole different process to the Enough is Enough campaign. Even if only half that figure joined it would still compare favourably with the Labour Party membership.

Starmer and his team have been coy about releasing membership figures. National Executive Committees habitually release this information but stopped at the last meetings. People still in Labour will tell you that active members are few and far between. Those official members of Labour include many who just pay and are not active.

Labour's diminishment is hardly surprising given the continued refusal to recognise genocide in Gaza, its anti-migrant policy and cuts to welfare. Meetings deliberately reduce political discussion to a minimum. They have even changed the rules so you have less frequent ward meetings. Councilors and political careerists are keeping the basic structures operating.

Already more members will leave as the Corbyn/Sultana process gets underway. The huge numbers signing up will focus people's minds and bring on board those who are waiting to make a choice.

How Labour and mainstream media have responded

Compared to the media's blow by blow coverage of the recent surge in Farage's Reform party there has been far less coverage of the explosion in sign-ups for the new left party. Nevertheless, it has been impossible to ignore several polls that have shown the new party at between 10 and 15%. It would take votes from Labour, the Greens and non-voters (roughly a third of each).

Pro-Starmer journalists are putting forward contradictory positions. Some are emphasizing the internal difficulties and are exaggerating the differences between the Sultana camp and the Corbyn courtiers. They predict it will all end in tears and division. At the same time others are saying that the new party is irresponsibly splitting votes on the left – in other words it will be effective and get a significant number of votes.

One journalist, [Sean O'Grady](#) writing in the *Independent*, gives the party 6 months to split into Sultana and Corbyn wings. He even thinks it will strengthen Starmer by clarifying matters and he will somehow win back progressive votes around his leadership to block Farage. The advisors are pushing this Macron style scenario as the future of Labour. Good luck!

I heard the split argument among local Labour party members when we discussed the new party. It is Starmer's policies and U turns that led to the Labour votes splitting to the Greens and left candidates. You cannot cynically use the anti-democratic nature of our electoral system to argue against people establishing a new party. It is ironic when massive majorities voted for Proportional Representation at party conferences. As one person commented on social media the other day when looking at how many have signed up – it is not so much about splitting the vote as reclaiming it.

In fact many advocates of the new party are arguing strongly against splitting the vote between progressive Green candidates and new left party ones. At the same time we would hold out a hand to those Labour MPs who have spoken up on Palestine or voted against the welfare cuts – it would be silly to put up a left party candidate against a John McDonnell or Diane Abbott.

How has the Marxist or radical left responded

Unlike with some previous alternative projects nearly every left group such as the Socialist Party, Counterfire and the Socialist Workers Party has endorsed the new project and will be building it. Some independent activists and socialists somehow think this is a bad thing, that inevitably these groups will intervene in a negative way. See this lighthearted article for example.

If you are an open, inclusive party, you cannot put a veto on the participation of several thousand seasoned and dedicated activists. Sometimes Leninist groups do alienate people by the crass way they work in the mass movement. For instance the Revolutionary Communist Party has already said it will be joining to transform the party into a revolutionary Marxist vanguard party. Farage, no mug, even invited one of them onto his GB news programme.

If even a quarter or a third of those signing up do join and build it then we should be able to neutralize ultra left policies being adopted. The key to defusing fruitless propagandizing is to have firm rules on discussion and to build the party through mass activity in defence of working and oppressed people.

Serious people understand that a Corbyn/Sultana party will be clearly to the left of Labour and offer an opportunity to build an alternative to Labourism. Its programme will be unacceptable to Capital which will unleash a bigger counter offensive than we saw with Corbyn mark 1. Spending time today – in a non revolutionary situation – pushing it to adopt a clear line on destroying the capitalist state is silly. Marxist currents can raise such questions in appropriate ways – it is important that a revolutionary pole or current can develop.

Some comrades tend to counterpose electoralism to struggle in the streets and workplaces in a crude way. Any

building of a socialist alternative appears utopian without a radical presence at all levels of government. Even an upsurge of self-organised struggles requires a political strategy and outcome if real change is to be achieved.

We don't want a Labour Party 2

On the other hand, we do not want the party to replay the cards of the failed Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party. It will be the case that a number of people joining will see it as a chance of recovering the Labour Party that they feel Blair and Starmer have destroyed. Some may see it as ginger group to put pressure on the Labour leadership, maybe even to force Starmer and the right wing out and then reunify with the mother ship.

James Schneider makes pertinent comments about these issues in his recent interview at the [Sidecar](#) site.

If the new party spends all its time working out the perfect social care policy for our imaginary left-technocratic future when we run the state, it will go nowhere. If it views itself as a Labour Party 2.0, with better politics than the current one but with no outlets for real popular participation, it will be destroyed by countervailing powers. During the Corbyn period we were trapped in a position where Labour members were often stuck waiting for a handful of people at the top to make decisions rather than becoming agents and leaders themselves. We cannot repeat that mistake.

Schneider goes on to emphasise how we need to develop what he calls popular power rather than narrow electoralism – the party should invest in developing self organisation throughout our workplaces and civil society

I like his formulation – class war with a grin. In other words, we need a party that breaks new ground and develops a better political culture. It should be brash and combative challenging the mainstream media narrative. We failed once to hold on to the thousands of new activists who joined Labour. They were not interested in how Labour Party business worked, and they drifted away. The advantage we have this time is that we are not bringing people into a pre-existing, stultifying institution. We have at least a chance to make something different.

And the Greens?

I think Schneider is rather negative towards the Greens. He suggests they have a mathematical electoralist approach and that groups like Extinction Rebellion had had more impact. I think a 10% score in the polls and the ability to have 800 or so councilors and quadruple your MPs is evidence of a certain impact.

The more radical groups can rise up and go down quite quickly. The Greens are heterogeneous – they are different animals in North London, Bristol or rural Norfolk. If Zack Polanski were to win the leadership it will strengthen the radical wing and open the way to electoral alliances in areas like the cities where Labour is vulnerable.

There has been talk, given the polling, that a new Left party with a dozen or more MPs could, along with the Greens, have some decisive role if there were to be a hung parliament. Given the volatility of British politics this cannot be excluded.

What we do know is that new left parties in Greece, Spain and Italy have been destroyed on the question of alliances in government with Labourist type parties. It may be possible to give external support to a government committed to progressive policies without any generalized coalition and without taking on any ministries.

This is what the Left Bloc and the CP did in Portugal a few years ago. It is understandable if this prevents a hard right or neo fascist government being formed. However, this discussion about a hung parliament should not dominate.

Sultana's decisive move

What everyone can see today with the number of sign ups is that we cannot just dismiss this situation as the same old left project like Respect, Socialist Alliance or Left Unity. It is of a different scale. People seem surprised that the process has not been easy but when the stakes are so high and we have a historic opportunity then people will be passionate and fight their corner.

We should not underestimate Zarah Sultana's contribution. She was a bit like the new friend who came on holiday with a well-established group who always took forever to choose the restaurant in the evening. At least half an hour had been wasted and she just went and sat and they all reluctantly followed.

Of course there was moaning among the established group about the cheek of the new friend. Clearly Corbyn's court of advisors and stall were blindsided by Sultana and were put out. But at least she got things moving. More importantly, she broadens the appeal of the new formation. She is from another generation, a woman and of south Asian heritage. Zarah epitomizes the generation Labour has lost over Palestine.

At the same time it looks like the loose federation idea has now been overtaken by plans of a conference and people signing up to a party. Scheider himself, who is close to Corbyn, argues for a democratic structure and collective leadership. The devil may be in the detail but there is every chance that the party will be democratically set up and will be a national focus for the millions looking for an alternative to the left of Starmer.

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Source: [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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