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Britain and the Labour Party

Don't despair, organise!

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It's not been an easy time for anyone on the left in Britain,

The pandemic and the appalling way the #ToxicTories have responded to it are obviously dominating most of our waking - and often sleeping - lives.

But for those of us on the Labour left there were points of potential demoralisation before C-19 dominated the political horizon. For almost five years, since Corbyn's election as Labour leader we had the goal of electing a left Labour government at Westminster. That dream was at least postponed for the foreseeable future when the Tories won in December 2019. The situation in Scotland is clearly different, but we don't have the space to go into that here.

Socialist Resistance argued that there were particular factors that operated in the Tories favour during the December 2019 General Election - allowing them to fight that campaign on the territory of 'Getting Brexit Done' and whipping up further English nationalism, racism and xenophobia to put extra wind in their sails.

But that doesn't mean we don't recognise that the defeat and the subsequent - and inevitable - resignation of Corbyn wasn't a blow.

Then we had the Labour leadership, deputy leadership and National Executive Committee (NEC) elections from January until April. Sadly Rebecca Long-Bailey's campaign could only be described as lacklustre but at least as big a contribution to Starmer's success came from the fact that a significant number of people who had previously backed Corbyn supported him. These were by and large people who moved left to support Corbyn but faced with December's defeat retreated back to where they had been before.

So there was a coalition within Labour responsible for that defeat: between those who had consistently organised against Corbyn and his team and people who had believed that the left had proved it was unelectable (completely forgetting that it was Blair and Brown who bequeathed us this stretch of Tory rule).

The third major blow to the morale of the Labour left came the week after Starmer's election with the publication of the leaked report on Labour's treatment of alleged antisemitism. This report revealed a depth of manipulation against the left leadership, combined with a level of misogyny racism and bullying that was literally breathtaking.

And then there is the response of the new Starmer leadership, elected on promises to stick to much of Corbyn's programme but moving rapidly to the right, not only on policy (backtracking on support for renters and on solidarity with the people of Kashmir, to name but two) but even more critically on responding to the report and on internal democracy.

In any other workplace someone against whom there appears to be evidence of gross misconduct would be suspended pending investigation. And people have been expelled from the party on virtually no evidence - as the report itself demonstrates.

Lift the Labour Party lockdown

But Starmer has not only left those still working in Labour's HQ in Southside untouched, but as we understand it has not taken action against anyone in terms of party membership, but has imposed a lockdown of the Labour Party at a local level to block any democratic response.

Of course it's absolutely right at the current time that there should not be any physical Labour Party meetings - or of trade unions or campaigns. But without any reasons being given, local party officers have been informed that while 'informal' online meetings can take place, no political decisions can be taken.

This is unacceptable. Parliament at Westminster and the devolved nations are meeting largely virtually, as are select committees of MPs as is Labour's National Executive Committee. We are in a huge national crisis given both the pandemic and the Tory response. The leaked report is the biggest scandal inside the Labour Party for a very long time - and one which particularly seriously threatens the long term support for Labour in Black communities.

It's true that there may be people potentially excluded from virtual local meetings because they don't have the tech, though the mobile phone is virtually universal and capable of being used for such meetings. But many are regularly excluded from standard physical meetings because they are shift workers, carers or by reason of impairment. In the long term we should combine both physical and virtual forms of organising - in the short term we say: lift the Labour Party lockdown!

Balance of forces

Given all this, it is understandable that many are questioning their Labour Party membership and a not inconsiderable number are leaving now. The overall balance of forces is currently certainly poor within the Labour Party - but where is it better?

There is need to step up the fight against racism - particularly when C-19 has a disproportionate impact on Black communities and when the number of racist attacks is increasing at the same time.

There are some green shoots in terms of workers organising for the PPE they need, against lifting the lockdown in a way that privileges their profits over our lives. The NEU teachers' union and the transport unions are not surprisingly particularly vocal at the minute in the face of the government's moves yesterday to restart English Schools without adequate safety.

There are also wide discussions about what constitutes essential work. There is the flourishing of impressively dense mutual aid groups across communities.

It's certainly the case that the left as a whole, including the Labour left, needs to work around these issues and give trade union and community organising greater priority. But doing these things is not hampered by being Labour Party members, but strengthened.

In some cases the local relationship of forces means we can bring speakers for such struggles into local parties, while in others the collective connections will be more effectively made through left caucuses. That can improve the balance of forces inside local parties and put pressure on the leadership - but equally vitally increase the support for those vital struggles.

The dynamic to leave the Party now is to some extent a product in some people's illusions in Corbyn. It was almost as if he had the magic wand and could make everything better, with their role being limited to social media. It's difficult not to feel irritated by people asking what the Labour Party has to offer them individually as if it were a supermarket.

On the other hand those of us with more political experience failed to do sufficient to challenge those views through formal or informal political education and by actually linking local parties to those struggles, however few, that were going on in our communities, whether over climate change, universal credit or anything else. Now the Labour left needs to find ways of remaining connected with as many as possible of those we can't persuade not to leave - otherwise the danger of people dropping out all together will only increase.

It's true that Corbyn's leadership gave a real possibility of a left Labour government which could have brought big improvements to millions of people's lives. It's true that there remains a big audience for left ideas and campaigns within the biggest political party in Europe. But the most fundamental reason for socialists to be inside the Labour Party is its historic and strategic importance to working class struggle, particularly the linkage with unions which we want to deepen (and democratise)

Organising the left locally and nationally

The bedrock of left organising in the Labour Party needs to be what happens locally. Even with virtual meetings, far more people engage with what's going on in their immediate area - and that's even more the case when meetings are physical.

Corbyn's time as Labour leader brought us Momentum which was a hugely contradictory experience. Momentum was the way that lots of young people in particular related to Labour. It was the banner under which many new local left groups were launched or re-launched initially. Welsh Labour Grassroots became the banner under which Momentum organised in Wales and does so in a more democratic way.

Momentum's other particular strength was that it did mobilise people around elections and marginal constituencies in a way many official structure failed to. And we know from the leaked report that it was the cancer at the heart of Labour HQ that played a significant hidden role in preventing Corbyn getting to Number 10 in 2017. But there were problems with Momentum from the beginning. For reasons that seem counterintuitive, the new left wing Labour leadership backed it being set up as a company and there was never any real internal democracy. Political education was sporadic and apart from 'The World Transformed' festivals at Labour conference, which Momentum spawned, it was very much left to local initiative despite the fact that it had was a substantial national apparatus.

On the question of the witchhunt generally and antisemitism particularly, there was also a major problem from the beginning. While some local Momentum groups took a different approach on some or all occasions, Momentum nationally always conceded far too much to those who claimed Labour was institutionally antisemitic and that Corbyn was the problem. This then became part of the pressure on the Labour leadership to do likewise. This was a serious error as we in SR consistently argued.

At the same time a series of 'single issue' campaigns were launched during this period, most notably Jewish Voice for Labour (JVL), Red Green Labour (and later Labour for a Green New Deal), Labour Women Leading but also Red Labour, Labour against the Witchhunt, Labour against Austerity and more latterly the Socialist Campaign group of Labour Councillors. Some of these challenged existing organisations which had a problematic orientation such as the Jewish Labour Movement for JVL or Labour Women's Network, while on the environment, the left networks were

able to organise to get Labour Party conference in 2019 to back a Green New Deal, bypassing the more longstanding but conservative SERA affiliate to a large extent.

There was one particular weakness in this regard on the question of Black self-organisation Support for Black Sections was a key signature for the Bennite left in the 1980s. Grassroots Black Left was set up in around 2018 but remains relatively weak and unrepresentative. The issue has not been prioritised by the left as a whole in the way it should have been. This leaves us less ability to respond either to the vile racism in the report or to the way Black Communities are being particularly hard hit both to the virus itself and the Tories policies in response,

During this period, there was also an attempt at Labour left collaboration to put forward a common slate for the constituency places on the National Executive committee elected by the entire membership. The Centre Left Grass Roots Alliance had started many years before Corbyn became leader, with the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy at its centre. It then expanded to include Momentum and latterly a number of other organisations

There have always been big problems with how that organisation decided anything - which was by consensus, in effect a veto by some. This meant both the new JVL and GBL groups were kept out of the process for some considerable time and only included after big fights, but the ultimate decision making process still didn't change. By the time of the last NEC by elections earlier in 2020, Momentum had gone their own way effectively gifting those seats to the right.

How to reform this process effectively would be a topic for a separate article but it should be realised that even if the left takes all the constituency member-elected places, that would not give a left majority on the NEC as some places are in the gift of the leader - and therefore currently filled by our opponents -while others represent the affiliated trade unions and to that extent are rather more balanced.

Moving forward

In the period since Corbyn stood down there have been a number of new initiatives including the relaunch of the Socialist Campaign group of Labour MPs under the leadership of Richard Burgon and the development of new connections and co-ordination between Black members such as the Last Straw call organised by left NEC member Huda Elmi attended by over 500 members - the majority of whom were Black.

There have also been new moves to challenge the national leadership of Momentum with the launch of Forward Momentum and Momentum International. While we wish those organisations well, SR is not of the view that it is possible to reform Momentum. We see an increasing number of local groups who previously used the label Momentum adopting instead more inclusive names such as X Labour Left, which we think better represent a model for local organising.

A new national co-ordination, Don't Leave Organise (DLO), has been recently launched. This came out of collaboration between JVL, Red Labour, and the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) during the NEC by-elections campaign and the associated suspensions, including the importantly successful push to reinstate Jo Bird as a candidate. One of the notable things about DLO is that it has already won the backing of two important left trade unions, the Bakers and the FBU. It has long been a problem across large swathes of the Labour left that they only focus of what's going on in constituency parties and ignore the issue of the affiliated unions. That's been one of the distinctive aspects of the LRC and now of Don't Leave Organise.

Don't despair, organise!

We would urge readers in England and Wales who are in the Labour Party both to sign up to Don't Leave Organise individually and where possible to get any local Labour left groups you are involved in to sign up, as well as any single issue Labour campaign groups you participate in. And in the meantime continue to do what you can to give voice to the anger that clearly exists against this Tory government which undoubtedly has blood on its hands, to use the contradictory opportunities that exist to develop broader political discussion and get (more) involved in trade union campaigns and in community organising through mutual aid.

Source **Socialist Resistance** » <https://socialistresistance.org/dont-despair-organise/19954>].

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