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Britain

Labour must stand firm on antisemitism code of conduct

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The British Labour Party's ruling National Executive Committee (NEC) next meets on September 4. There are many crucial matters on the agenda, including which of the proposals from the Democracy review will be put to Annual Conference later in September in Liverpool. But one item will overshadow all others – whether the position on the IHRA definition of antisemitism and its associated ‘examples’ taken at the last NEC meeting will be maintained or whether the meeting will cave in in the face of relentless pressure.

For months, there has been a concerted and vicious campaign orchestrated by key figures of the right of the Parliamentary Labour Party, with backing from most of the mainstream media, including the BBC. The mainstream Jewish press in Britain has also participated – taking the unprecedented step of publishing a common front page in which they allege that an “existential threat to Jewish life in this country that would be posed by a Jeremy Corbyn-led government”.

It is clear that the goal of this campaign is to prevent Jeremy Corbyn from being elected Prime Minister. Remarkably, given the ferocious barrage of smears against the Labour leader, the party is not suffering in the polls. There are reports that Labour’s membership is growing. Large meetings are taking place to plan action and to resist this coup. Many people understand what is going on.

Allegations of antisemitism apparently endemic to the Labour Party are the latest cynical ploy in this war against the Labour leader. The very same people fought to prevent Corbyn being elected in the first place and then worked tirelessly – and fruitlessly – to remove him. This assault should be defeated in the same way that the previous attacks have been – by standing firm, sticking with the principled politics of Corbyn’s leadership campaigns and the 2017 manifesto.

What is at stake is not only a vital discussion about discrimination, about racism and about antisemitism. The vitriol against Corbyn and his team now is as nothing in comparison with the boulders that will be hurled at the whole movement during the next general election campaign, whenever that comes. And that too will pale into insignificance with what we will be confronted with if we face that down and elect a Labour government under Corbyn’s leadership. We ain’t seen anything yet – and concessions now stand us in very poor stead for the fights to come. They miseducate our supporters and give confidence to those who are anyway implacably opposed to us.

Antisemitism

Antisemitism is, as the Jewish Voice for Labour model resolution sets out, “hostility or hatred directed at Jews”. [1] And, as it also points out, the NEC Code of Conduct on Antisemitism states emphatically: “Labour is an anti-racist party. Antisemitism is racism. It is unacceptable in our Party and in wider society”.

All forms of racism are on the rise in Britain – and in many parts of the world. They need to be challenged, especially inside working class organisations, as do all forms of oppressive behaviour: sexism, homophobia, transphobia and discrimination against disabled people. The left should reject the notion of hierarchies of oppression – like forms of prejudice and discrimination themselves, this view is used to divide and weaken our struggles. United we stand.

Antisemitism, like all forms of racism, has its particular dynamics. Stereotypes based on racism abound – and the

internet, as well as being a powerful tool for radical organising, also makes the circulation of hate speech – sometimes consciously and sometimes unthinkingly – more pervasive. The left should not minimise the pernicious impact of such myths – either when written or where they facilitate acts of discrimination and violence against individuals and communities.

The code of conduct agreed by the last NEC meets this test. *Socialist Resistance* supports it. The NEC text crucially also sets out what antisemitism is **not**; it is not “legitimate criticism of the state of Israel or the ideology of Zionism”. We think this is vital – in our view accusations of antisemitism have been made in some cases where what was actually at issue was support for the struggle of the Palestinian people – including the growing Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Palestinians silenced

Of course the people who are most directly affected by this are Palestinians themselves. British Palestinian Arab and Labour Party member Chris Khamis wrote about this back in April – yes that’s right, this campaign has been going on that long. [2] Ghada Karmi put it like this in July “I hope that the party will maintain its code of conduct. If replaced with a word-for-word copy of the IHRA document, then I, as a member, would be prevented from speaking about what happened to me and my family – our dispossession, forced removal and permanent ban from our home purely because we were Arab.”

And an important statement has been issued by 84 migrant and BAME organisations, organised by Palestinian groups, which points out that adopting all the examples would in fact be in breach of Article 10 of the Human Rights Act. [3] *Socialist Resistance* agrees with this assessment and calls on the Labour Party and the whole Labour movement to stand with the Palestinian people – and with those Palestinians in Britain fighting to be heard.

We should also look at the international political context. The Israeli state continues its murderous offensive against the Palestinians, with scant outrage in most of the British media about what The Independent describes as Israel’s “heaviest barrage since the 2014 war” [4] Where were the accurate reports about the Great Return March to commemorate the anniversary of the Nakba – during which 166 Palestinians were killed by the Israeli Defence Force? Not on the BBC, that’s for sure. At the same time, the movement in solidarity with Palestine has been growing and the campaign for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions has increased in strength and reach – including amongst Jewish communities.

The Israeli state responds to this growing movement by going to enormous lengths (with huge financial and political resources) to incapacitate those who criticise it. This operates at many different levels – from banks closing down or refusing to open accounts for the solidarity movement to an ideological assault on the aims and functioning of the movement – including painting it as intrinsically antisemitic.

The majority of politicians in the US and Europe have gone along with this approach – which is why Jeremy Corbyn is such a target. The situation is worse in France. During the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2014, solidarity demonstrations were not allowed in Paris. The French Supreme Court ruled on 20 October, 2015 that simply calling for a boycott of Israeli products would be illegal and punishable by law – and activists have indeed been prosecuted. Emmanuel Macron said during the presidential campaign in 2017: “Boycotting Israel has been condemned by France and there’s no reason why we should discuss the matter again.” The aim of course is to replicate this situation everywhere. Free speech only for some.

Bad Jews and good Jews?

Many powerful words have been written in defence of the position adopted by Labour's previous NEC meeting. In terms of the politics behind the attack, this article sets out very clearly that this is about Israel and Palestine not about racism towards Jews. [\[5\]](#)

Under the headline Labour's crisis is over Israel, not anti-semitism, Jonathan Cook sets out the way that Jews have been divided into good Jews – i.e. those that support every action of the Israeli state – and bad Jews – those that don't. So Margaret Hodge MP has a protective shield when she abuses and vilifies Jeremy Corbyn, but other Jews, who take a different political position, do not.

Hodge's initial comment, denouncing Corbyn to his face as a "fucking antisemite and racist", was disgraceful enough. But her subsequent comment that, on hearing that she was to face a disciplinary hearing over the remarks she "felt the same fear her father would have felt when he was fleeing Nazi Germany", completely departed from most people's reality. This comment utterly trivialised the Holocaust, and was angrily condemned by many Jews who had lost relatives to Nazi barbarity.

This despicable comment must surely breach the prohibition in the IHRA definition and in the NEC Code of Conduct against comparing current political developments to the Nazis, but Hodge seems to have been given a free pass. It seems that it is permissible for Israel's supporters to call their opponents Nazis.

In fact, such comparisons are not unusual in Israeli political discourse, where such abuse is common – most notoriously by current PM Binyamin Netanyahu against his predecessor Yitzhak Rabin in the months leading up to the latter's assassination in November 1995. And Jewish supporters of Palestinian rights are regularly denounced as "kapos" (ie, collaborators with the Nazis) by Zionist fanatics in Britain.

This trivialisation of the Holocaust, and the repeated attacks on Jewish dissidents using Nazi similes, are far more antisemitic than most of the cases investigated by the NEC and continually highlighted by the press.

Amongst the many incisive articles written by Jews in Britain making similar points, two deserve special mention. One is a piece from David Rosenberg; the other is from Susan Pashkoff's. [\[6\]](#) [\[7\]](#) Both show not only the depth of differences between Jews, but the way those who claim to speak for "the Jewish community" treat Jews who disagree with them with unspeakable contempt and indeed sometimes act to endanger their safety.

Organisations on the left like Jewish Voice for Labour (JVL), Free Speech on Israel, Jewish Socialists' Group, Jews for Justice for Palestinians, Jewdas and the newly launched Na'amod alongside the more mainstream Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish leadership council or the Jewish Labour Movement demonstrate that there is an enormous diversity of opinion amongst – and indeed sometimes sharp debate between – Jews living in Britain. [\[8\]](#) [\[9\]](#) [\[10\]](#) [\[11\]](#) [\[12\]](#) [\[13\]](#)

This should be no surprise – it's true in every other community of migrant origin.

Indeed, as Women against Fundamentalism pointed out time and again, if the labour movement only recognises those who are elected leaders in such communities, we are extremely likely to reinforce reactionary and patriarchal voices and at best ignore and at worst silence those struggling against them. [\[14\]](#) This has been true for groups like the Asian Youth Movement which took a different position to the (male) community elders about how to deal with fascist attacks and to women's groups in many communities organising against crimes like so called honour killings.

Today it's true of those Jews who, in increasing numbers, assert that the Israeli state does not speak for them when it murders Palestinians, and of course those who defend Jeremy Corbyn, for, amongst many other things, his long record of solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Backpedalling won't stop the vilification of Corbyn

Given all this, it should seem obvious that the NEC on September 4 must stand firm and reiterate the decisions on the IHRA made at the previous meeting, rather than given in to bullies. In terms of the detail of what is actually being debated, as well as summarising the key arguments this piece is invaluable. [15] But tragically, it does not seem certain that this is what will happen.

Some key figures have made their position – in favour of backpedalling – clear. UNISON's General Secretary Dave Prentis flies in the face of all evidence in his *New Statesman* article. [16] Apart from supporting the scurrilous claim made by rightwing Labour councillors in Barnet that antisemitism, rather than the failure of the Labour Group leadership to put forward a radical alternative to the Tories, was what lost seats in the London Borough earlier this year, Prentis effectively blames Labour's NEC for the pages of abuse printed attacking them. Just do what is being asked by your enemies and we can focus on the real issue of fighting the Tories. This is nonsense as any trade unionist or any activist worth their salt can see. That's because we can have no common cause with the people making these demands – something they are clearer about than some of those claiming to be on our side!

Prentis's position is particularly despicable given that UNISON has a long record of work in solidarity with Palestine and probably the most detailed in supporting BDS of any British trade union. But that hasn't stopped him waving aside the concerns that the adoption of all the example have **already** been used to prevent campaigning. It's less of a surprise that Paddy Lillis of USDAW and Tim Roache of the GMB are also arguing for Labour to back down – but it's significant given that both unions have seats on Labour's NEC.

The final piece in the puzzle of trade union leaders seems at first glance more difficult to decipher – UNITE General Secretary Len McCluskey's piece in the *Huffington Post*. [17] The original article appears under the headline "Corbyn Has Answered Concerns On Anti-Semitism, But Jewish Community Leaders Are Refusing To Take 'Yes' For An Answer" and it is republished on the JVL website under the banner "Len McCluskey comes out fighting."

It's certainly true that the burden of McCluskey's article is in line with what we have argued here. But, despite that, in the end it comes to precisely the opposite conclusion. This seems to be because he gives benefit of the doubt to organisations like the Board of Deputies, while analysing very sharply the motives of right wing Labour MPs. So he argues: "It would be for the best if all eleven were now agreed, so the party can move on." No Len, this will not have that effect at all, it will result in yet more demands – for said organisations to have a say in Labour's internal disciplinary processes for example, for them to determine who are legitimate representatives of the community etc etc, and most of all for Jeremy's scalp.

Standing firm is the only way forward!

[Socialist Resistance](#)

PS:

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[1] <https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/blog/model-motion-in-defence-of-the-nec-antisemitism-code-of-conduct/>

[2] <http://socialistresistance.org/palestinians-will-not-be-silenced/12003>

[3] <https://ourhistory-ourplace.co.uk/> and the number of signatories has continued to grow since this article was first published

[4] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/gaza-air-strikes-latest-updates-israel-rockets-palestinians-killed-a8447726.html>

[5] <https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/blog/policing-the-debate-over-israel/>

[6] <https://rebellion602.wordpress.com/2018/08/04/stephen-pollards-crocodile-tears-about-the-threats-to-jews/>

[7] <http://socialistresistance.org/feeling-under-siege/13031>

[8] <https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/>

[9] <https://freespeechonisrael.org.uk/>

[10] <http://www.jewishsocialist.org.uk/>

[11] <https://jffp.com/>

[12] <https://www.jewdas.org/>

[13] <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-we-re-u-k-jews-s-newest-anti-occupation-group-you-can-t-dismiss-us-1.6366813>

[14] <http://womenagainstofundamentalism.org/>

[15] <https://mailchi.mp/9cb35ad60217/ihra-and-labour-necs-antisemitism-codes-side-by-side-628989>

[16] <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/08/why-labour-must-adopt-full-ihra-definition-anti-semitism>

[17]

https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/amp/entry/anti-semitism-labour_uk_5b7573dee4b0df9b093ccbc6/?utm_hp_ref=uk-politics&_twitter_impression=true