

How can Corbyn's successes strengthen the fight against austerity?



Opposing austerity is popular

Only a handful of Labour MPs – including Jeremy Corbyn – have put forward such 'dangerous' ideas as opposition to austerity, or calling for the abolition of student tuition fees or for the repeal of the anti-trade union laws. Up until now they have been drowned out by the baying of the Blairites. This was summed up by the leadership election before Jeremy Corbyn's late entrance, with all three candidates competing to show who was the most 'business friendly'.

Now Jeremy Corbyn has got a platform for an anti-austerity programme. The result has been a tidal wave of enthusiasm for his candidacy. Young people and trade unionists, excited about anti-austerity ideas are the worst nightmare of the Blairites. The right wing has dedicated decades to stamping socialist ideas out of the Labour Party, beginning with the witch-hunt against the Militant Tendency (now the Socialist Party). Now the anti-austerity voice of the majority is in danger of bursting their Westminster bubble.

Corbyn's supporters are mainly young people new to politics and older workers who had been disillusioned by Labour's transformation into a capitalist party. Labour lost the general election not for being too left wing, as all the other Labour leadership candidates claim, but for not being left wing enough. Millions of 'traditional Labour' voters did not vote,

Panic is gripping the right wing clique that dominates the Labour Party at the likelihood of Jeremy Corbyn becoming the next Labour leader. In desperation they are ruling out thousands of people who have registered to vote in the contest in the hope they can stop Corbyn winning. People ruled out include Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS trade union. Harriet Harman, acting Labour leader, has justified the numbers being ruled out by saying that many have supported other parties in the past. But this strict criterion has only been invented since people with left wing views started signing up. Previously Tory MPs like Shaun Woodward were allowed to defect straight to Labour – he was handed a safe parliamentary seat and a seat in the cabinet. The current purge of voters is an indication of how the right wing clique that dominates the Labour Party machine will behave in the likely event of Corbyn winning.

For decades barely a whisper of the views of the majority of working-class people – far to the left of any of the establishment parties – has been heard in Westminster. For example, 68%, 67% and 66% support renationalisation of the energy companies, the Royal Mail and the railway companies respectively. Yet until now Labour – just like the Tories and the Lib-Dems – has refused to promise any renationalisation. On the contrary in office it massively expanded the role of the private sector in the NHS and other parts of the public sector.

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or voted for other parties, because they could not stomach Labour's 'austerity-lite' programme. Now, faced with further vicious attacks on working class people by this Tory government, Jeremy Corbyn's candidature has kindled a hope that Labour could become a voice in defence of all those under the cosh. His written campaign programme is actually quite limited, merely calling for 'meaningful regulation of the banking sector' rather than for nationalisation of the banks under democratic control, for example. Nonetheless he has enthused many with his clear call for abolition of student fees and to reinstate the student grant, his promise to repeal anti-trade union laws, call for renationalisation of the rail and energy companies, and other pledges.

Corbyn victory only first step

If Corbyn wins it would be an important step towards establishing a clear anti-austerity party. However, winning the Labour leadership would only be the beginning. It is already clear that the right wing which dominates the Parliamentary Labour Party and the Labour machine will not accept his leadership. Of the 232 members of the Parliamentary Labour Party only nine are members of the Socialist Campaign Group to which Jeremy Corbyn belongs. Even before the contest is over Labour MPs are muttering about legal action and threatening to trigger another election immediately in order to get Jeremy Corbyn 'out by Christmas'. Far from respecting democracy the Blairites, as Bertolt Brecht put it, want to dissolve the electorate and get a new one! However, if Corbyn wins by a big margin it is probable that the Labour right would not feel confident to move against him straight away. Nonetheless, even then they would immediately set out to undermine him, hoping to get rid of him as soon as possible.

So for all those who hope a Jeremy Corbyn victory would be the first step in building a powerful anti-austerity movement, voting for him would need to only be the start. Under attack from the right-wing of the Labour Party, the capitalist media and big business, Jeremy Corbyn will need to immediately start mobilising and organising all of those who have supported him.

Corbyn has quite rightly said that there will be a grassroots rebellion if Labour MPs attempt (as they will) to block attempts to re-democratise the party. That rebellion, however, cannot be left to chance but will need to be organised from day one if it is to succeed. At the moment Labour is virtually without any democratic structures; the national conference is a completely toothless 'consultative' body. It is clear that the right are organising to make sure this remains the case – the left needs to be organised as well and to fight for a party that stands on socialist policies and in which the organised trade union movement and the young people enthused by Jeremy Corbyn's stand have a democratic voice.

As a first step we would encourage Corbyn to organise an emergency conference of all those who have voted for him or support him, plus the many trade unions – including non-affiliated unions like the RMT, PCS and FBU – which support a fighting anti-austerity programme. The Socialist Party would participate in such a conference and would encourage others to do the same.

The battle against cuts in local councils – the role of TUSC

Jeremy Corbyn has rightly made the call for councils to stand together and refuse to implement government cuts. In the mass meetings around his campaign there has been enthusiasm for the idea of elected representatives who will simply not vote for austerity, starting with the council budget-making meetings that will take place in February and March 2016. Over 450 councillors have signed up to support Jeremy Corbyn. This is significant, but it is barely 6% of the total number of Labour councillors. One of the battles that will take place after the Labour leadership contest will be over whether Labour councils continue implementing Tory cuts or decide to stand and fight.

The Socialist Party is part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) which was co-founded by Bob Crow the late general secretary of the transport workers' union (the RMT) in order to stand anti-austerity candidates in elections. The existence

of TUSC has already helped Jeremy Corbyn's leadership bid in for example, the decision of the national executive committee of UNITE, a Labour-affiliated union, to nominate Jeremy Corbyn rather than Andy Burnham, partly motivated to counter the growing support for TUSC members campaigning in the union for a new party. TUSC could also assist in next year's council elections, by standing against those Labour candidates who refuse to sign up to the anti-cuts policies supported by Corbyn. Any politician who votes for cuts should not be allowed a free run at the ballot box, no matter what party label they wear.

What next?

On the basis of a determined campaign to re-democratise Labour and to shift it left it is not impossible that the right-wing could decide to leave to form a new party and the Labour Party could then as a whole turn leftwards, effectively becoming a new party.

However, if the road to such a transformation is blocked by those in the party hierarchy who fight to the bitter end to defend the interests of big business and the 1%, Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters shouldn't return to being prisoners of that situation but should help build a new mass workers' party outside of Labour. They could draw on the support of the many thousands who have been enthused by the Jeremy for Leader campaign and come together with the thousands of socialist and trade union activists outside Labour, including those in TUSC.

Meanwhile Labour would continue to implement Tory policies and the process of it being increasingly dismissed by working class people would continue.

Learning from the experiences and lessons of the new left formations in countries like Greece, Spain, Brazil and Germany, a new party in Britain could quickly take on flesh as a combative force acting in workers' interests, both electorally and in campaigns and struggles. In whatever way the scenario inside Labour develops, great opportunities will open up in this country for the development of workers' political representation.

