

LABOUR PARTY MARXISTS

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Tom Watson inflicts further damage on Labour Party

There is a real danger that after triggering article 50 Theresa May will follow through with a snap general election, writes **Eddie Ford**



Wants right in control ... in perpetuity

Looking to the future, Tom Watson has shifted the right's focus from a direct attack on Jeremy Corbyn and his leadership to Momentum and Unite's general secretary election. Obviously the right wants to see the back of Len McCluskey and a victory for his challenger, Gerald Coyne. Jon Lansman, the chair and effective owner of Momentum, was, of course, taped in Richmond on March 1, and the transcript was carefully released, to full media publicity, just as polling papers were being sent out to Unite members. How convenient.

Jeremy Corbyn and Tom Watson have issued a joint statement agreeing that groups have a right to influence the Labour Party so long as they "operate within the rules." But what Watson was trying to do was to influence the Unite election, not

expose any wrong doing by Momentum.

So it is worth asking whether or not Watson and Coyne are involved in a Machiavellian plot to shift opinion in Unite and maintain the right's grip over the structures of the Labour Party, up to and including the Parliamentary Labour Party, in perpetuity. Did brothers Watson and Coyne know about the "secret" Richmond tape before the "shocking revelation" was made public? Were they involved in any way in the taping, in transcribing it or in timing its release to *The Observer*?

Jon Lansman says he hopes that both Unite and the Communication Workers Union will soon affiliate to Momentum. Nothing sinister in that. They would merely be following in the footsteps of the TSSA and FBU. Doubtless that would mean more money in Momentum's coffers and more full-timers for Jon Lansman to appoint. A leftwing bureaucracy to rival the rightwing bureaucracy of the hugely well financed - not least thanks to Lord David Sainsbury - Progress faction.

Watson claims Momentum will "destroy Labour as an election force". Certainly the intervention in Unite's election and the civil war unleashed against Corbyn - by Iain McNicol, Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson, Watson himself and the vast majority of the PLP - has severely damaged Labour's chances in a general election.

The by-election results in Stoke and Copeland surely prove it. Yes, Labour won in Stoke Central. But unfortunately

this did not represent an endorsement of the Labour Party, nor was Ukip "well and truly stuffed" - a rather silly statement made by the ex-Trotskyist, Paul Mason, who went on to claim that Stoke "shows how to destroy" Ukip (actually it is Theresa May and her pursuit of a hard Brexit that is doing that).¹

Back in the real world though, Labour's candidate, Gareth Snell, did well to get 7,853 votes (37.1%), as opposed to 'Dr' Paul Nuttall's 5,233 (24.7%) on a very diminished turnout of 38.2% (down 11.7% from 2015).² But Labour's vote declined both in absolute and relative terms. In percentage terms we lost 2.2%, while Ukip gained 2.0%. Moreover, both the Tories and Liberal Democrats increased their share of the vote: 1.8% and 5.67% respectively. And, of course, if Ukip were "well and truly stuffed", it would have seen them come not second, but at the bottom of the list, along with the Monster Raving Loony Party, the British National Party and the Christian People's Alliance.

True, there had been intense media speculation, ever since Tristram Hunt resigned the seat for his "dream job" of director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, that Stoke Central could fall into the hands of Ukip - for fairly good reasons, it does have to be said. Stoke council, though not the same as the constituency, has been under 'no overall control' since 2015, with Ukip at its core. Stoke, of course, notched up the highest Brexit vote of any UK city

with 69.7% - hence the exaggerated talk about the "Brexit capital of Britain", and so on. Generally, Labour's base in the area has undergone a considerable erosion in recent years, enabling Ukip to make relatively impressive gains in all three of the city's constituencies at the last general election - for example, closing the gap with Labour to just 2.7% in neighbouring Stoke-on-Trent North.

Overall, you can say that Stoke was not a disaster for either Labour or Ukip - depending on what their expectations were. At Ukip's recent spring conference, Nigel Farage set the bar very high, describing Stoke as "fundamental" for "the futures of both the Labour Party and indeed of Ukip too" - it "matters and it matters hugely". By that criterion, Stoke was a failure - but, regardless, for the time being Farage is publicly standing by Nuttall. Only time will tell. Anyway, Stoke was only a "decisive rejection" of Ukip if you were genuinely convinced that it should have been a shoe-in for Nuttall - which was always a dubious proposition.

Copeland, however, is a different matter. Yes, you can talk about special circumstances - such as the importance of the nuclear industry as a major local employer, Storm Doris, and the fairly small size of the Labour majority (2,147). Nevertheless, in terms of the core constituency, Labour has held Copeland³ since 1935, when it was recovering from the debacle of the 1931 national government.

In the end, the Tory candidate, Trudi Harrison, won with 13,748 votes (44.2%) on a much higher turnout than Stoke of 51.33% - amounting to a 6.7% swing to the Tories. Labour slumped to 11,601 (37.3%), down 4.9% - whilst the Lib Dems and Ukip trailed well behind, getting 7.2% and 6.5% respectively (meaning that Ukip's vote fell sharply by 9%).⁴ This represented the first gain for a governing party at a UK by-election since 1982. Copeland also saw the largest increase in a governing party's share of the vote in a by-election since 1966.

Hence, Labour's situation is even worse than it first seems, when you remember that by-elections tend to underestimate support for the governing party and reward oppositional parties - an opportunity to give the government a mid-term kicking. This makes it all the more telling, and ominous, that it was May who had the most to celebrate afterwards. If we are to be brutally honest, Labour is in danger of decimation at the next general election.

Revival?

These by-elections raise a number of questions. Firstly, does Ukip have a long-term future? You do not have to be a genius to think it is pure nonsense to believe that Ukip is on the road to replacing Labour as the official opposition or natural voice of the working class. The Labour Party is a historically constituted party based on the trade union movement. True, that

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movement may have considerably declined over the decades, yet we are still dealing with a membership of six million - not something that will go away easily.

Ukip, on the other hand, is an ephemeral organisation based fundamentally on opposition to the European Union. In that sense, Ukip can only be defined negatively - by what it is against, not what it is for. Now, after June 23 - with Theresa May skilfully appropriating the 'hard Brexit' agenda - what actually is the point of Ukip? Maybe to stumble on as a pressure group, making sure the prime minister keeps to her pledge - which is not much of a reason to exist. No wonder Ukip tops are falling out with each other. Arron Banks with Douglas Carswell, Nigel Farage with Douglas Carswell, Neil Hammond with Nigel Farage, etc.

Essentially, in Copeland a big slice of the Ukip vote simply marched into the Tory camp. There is every reason to think that that this pattern will be replicated, to one degree or another, in the general election, as May ploughs ahead with her Brexit plans - EU deal or not, World Trade Organisation rules or not. If Brexit actually happens, which is a real possibility in the new world of Trump, that would further place a question mark over Ukip's future - with job done, surely time to close shop. Then again, if Marine Le Pen does defy the polls and becomes president of France - not something you can completely dismiss - then the EU will be finished anyway, almost making Brexit redundant. There would be nothing to exit.

What about the Lib Dems? Historically speaking, these should be ideal conditions for a revival after they were punished by voters for getting into bed with the Conservative Party in the coalition government. We have had the unedifying spectacle of Jeremy Corbyn getting out his three-line whip and urging Labour MPs to vote *with the Tories* to trigger article 50 and proceed with what Labour was telling us would be a catastrophe for the British economy - in which case, surely we should be duty-bound to oppose it? Step forward the Lib Dems, saviours of the country from Brexit darkness. After all, almost half of the electorate voted 'remain' and even in Stoke just over 30% came out for continued EU membership. And here is the party that is making opposition to Brexit its *core* issue. Yet what did they get in the by-elections? In Stoke, their vote only went up 5.7% (to 9.8% - at least they saved their deposit this time) and it was pretty much the same in Copeland - only increasing by 3.8%, putting them on 7.3% of the total vote.

You could argue that we could be seeing another attempt to create a centrist third party - in that the cross-party Open Britain has been backed by Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson, John Major and others. Thus John Prescott in the *Sunday Mirror* says that OB "looks like an SDP mark two"; with Mandelson and Blair "whipping up dissent to split Labour", just like Roy Jenkins and David Owen did before they launched the Social Democratic Party in 1981.⁵ This is very unconvincing, to say the least. In the 1980s you saw an upsurge of the centre ground - just as importantly, if not more so, for a while it looked as if joining the SDP could possibly be a good *career* move: it seemed to be going places.

But the situation today is totally different. British politics is increasingly polarised, albeit in contradictory ways, between left and right - and now is being *repolarised* along Brexit lines, with even more contradictory outcomes. The centre ground is not undergoing a significant revival. In Stoke and Copeland the Lib Dems merely showed that they still exist. Nor does anyone in the Labour Party seriously think that there is going to be another SDP that is going to provide them with an alternative career plan - or dislodge Jeremy Corbyn.

This explains Tom Watson's reaction to the by-election results at the Scottish Labour Party conference in Perth - he argued strongly that there should be no more challenges to Corbyn's leadership. Further attacks on Corbyn from the PLP could result in *Labour* MPs losing their

seats (and lucrative careers) - and for what? Corbyn cannot be removed under current circumstances, as the mass membership retains faith in him - that was recently tested with the second leadership contest. Owen Smith, the right's candidate, for all the backing from MPs and the media, lost badly - therefore to keep openly attacking Corbyn would be self-defeating. That is the calculation of most of the PLP: stick with JC as leader for now and muddle through to the next election, hoping that events might come to your rescue.

Flawed

When you look at opinion polls, what is immediately noticeable is not the growth of the centre - forget it - but the strength of the Tory Party, increasing its standing over this period to almost 1950s levels of support. Recent polls have put the Conservatives on over 40% and Labour as low as 24%. Theresa May continues to be the favoured choice for prime minister, with one poll showing 49% of people preferring her to Corbyn. The Labour leader is backed by only 15% of voters, whilst 36% don't know.

The last time the monthly *Guardian* series, for instance, produced a larger Conservative lead was back in 1983, just before the June general election trouncing of Michael Foot. In other words, in terms of popular support, it is the Labour Party that is losing out - in Scotland to the Scottish National Party, and in England and Wales to the Conservatives. Stoke and Copeland just underline the growing ascendancy of the Tory Party.

Needless to say, this poses acute problems for the Corbyn-McDonnell-Milne strategy - which appears fundamentally flawed, as argued by professor John Curtice in *The Guardian*.⁶ Curtice notes that Labour seems to have "misguidedly" decided that its "first priority" is to "stave off the threat from Ukip to its traditional working class vote - much of which supposedly voted 'leave' in the EU referendum". But in so doing, he writes, Labour "seems to have forgotten (or not realised) that most of those who voted Labour in 2015 - including those living in Labour seats in the north and the Midlands - backed 'remain'". Therefore the party, he concludes, is "at greater risk of losing votes to the pro-'remain' Liberal Democrats than to pro-Brexit Ukip" - with Stoke and Copeland seeming to prove that 'remain' voters "must now be Labour's top priority".

Instead of 'respecting' the verdict of the British people in David Cameron's botched referendum, Labour needs a clear perspective when it comes to Europe. Labour Party Marxists opposes all Brexit calls - even at this stage. However, that implies no illusions in the EU as presently constituted. Yet for socialism to be a viable project Europe must be our decisive point of departure. So we should commit ourselves not to making Brexit a success, but developing links and coordination with working class and leftwing forces in Europe.

Far-reaching

Our main goal should certainly not be the attempt to win the next general election by rebranding Jeremy Corbyn as a populist, courting the capitalist media or striking the latest compromise deal with Tom Watson, let alone going for a "a broad political alliance" with the Liberal Democrats, Greens, Scottish and Welsh nationalists. A well-trodden road to disaster. No, our main goal should be transforming the Labour Party, so that, in the words of Keir Hardie, it can "organise the working class into a great, independent political power to fight for the coming of socialism".

Towards that end we need rule changes to permit left, communist and revolutionary parties to affiliate once again. As long as they do not stand against us in elections, this can only strengthen us as a federal party. Today affiliate organisations include the Fabians, Christians on the Left, the Cooperative Party, the Jewish Labour Movement and Labour Business. Allow the SWP, SPEW, CPGB, the *Morning Star's* CPB, etc. to join our ranks.

Moreover, programmatically, we should consider a new clause four. Not a return to the old, 1918, version, but a commitment to working class rule and a society which aims for a stateless, classless, moneyless society, embodying the principle, "From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs". Towards that end the Labour Party should commit itself to achieving a democratic republic. The standing army, the monarchy, the House of Lords and the state sponsorship of the Church of England must go. We should support a single-chamber parliament, proportional representation and annual elections. All of that ought to be included in our new clause four (see box).

The PLP's perpetual rebels are out-and-out opportunists. Once and for all, we must put an end to such types exploiting our party. Being an MP ought to be an honour, not a career ladder, not a way for university graduates to secure a lucrative living.

A particularly potent weapon here is the demand that all our elected representatives should take only the average wage of a skilled worker. A principle upheld by the Paris Commune and the Bolshevik revolution. Even the Italian Communist Party under Enrico Berlinguer applied the 'partymax' in the 1970s. With the PCI's huge parliamentary fraction this proved to be a vital source of funds.

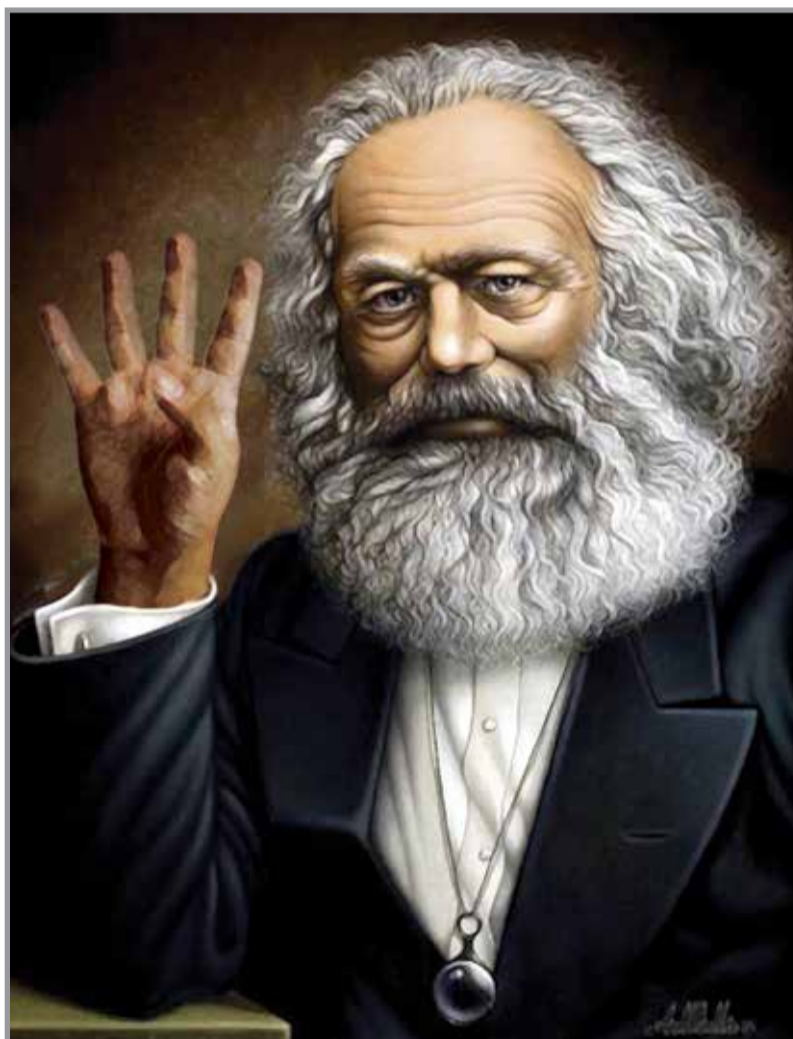
Our MPs are on a basic £67,060 annual

salary. On top of that they get around £12,000 in expenses and allowance, putting them on £79,060 (yet at present Labour MPs are only obliged to pay the £82 parliamentarian's subscription rate). Moreover, as leader of the official opposition, Jeremy Corbyn not only gets his MPs salary. He is entitled to an additional £73,617.⁷

Let them keep the average skilled workers' wage - say £40,000 (plus legitimate expenses). Then, however, they should hand the balance over to the party. Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell, Dianne Abbott ought to take the lead in this.

Imposing a partymax would give a considerable boost to our finances. Even if we leave out our 20 MEPs from the calculation, it would amount to a £900,000 addition. Anyway, whatever our finances, there is the basic principle. Our representatives ought to live like ordinary workers, not pampered members of the middle class. So, yes, let us agree the partymax as a basic principle.

Given the huge challenges before us, we urgently need to reach out to *all* those who are disgusted by corrupt career politicians, *all* those who aspire for a better world, *all* those who have an objective interest in ending capitalism. Towards that end we must establish our own press, radio and TV. To state the obvious, tweeting and texting have severe limits. They are



Our Clause Four

1. Labour is the federal party of the working class. We strive to bring all trade unions, cooperatives, socialist societies and leftwing groups and parties under our banner. We believe that unity brings strength.
2. Labour is committed to replacing the rule of capital with the rule of the working class. Socialism introduces a democratically planned economy, ends the ecologically ruinous cycle of production for the sake of production and moves towards a stateless, classless, moneyless society that embodies the principle, "From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs". Alone such benign conditions create the possibility of every individual fully realising their innate potentialities.
3. Towards that end Labour commits itself to achieving a democratic republic. The standing army, the monarchy, the House of Lords and the state sponsorship of the Church of England must go. We support a single-chamber parliament, proportional representation and annual elections.
4. Labour seeks to win the active backing of the majority of people and to form a government on this basis.
5. We shall work with others, in particular in the European Union, in pursuit of the aim of replacing capitalism with working class rule and socialism ●

LONDON COMMUNIST FORUM

Sundays, 5pm: Weekly political meeting and study group organised jointly by Labour Party Marxists and CPGB. Details in *Weekly Worker*.

VENUE:

The Calthorpe Arms,
252 Grays Inn Road,
London WC1X 8JR

brilliant media for transmitting simple, short and sharp messages. But, when it comes to complex ideas, debating history and charting political strategies, they are worse than useless.

Relying on the favours of the capitalist press, radio and TV is a game for fools. True, it worked splendidly for Tony Blair and Alistair Campbell. But as Neil Kinnock, Gordon Brown and Ed Miliband found to their cost, to live by the mainstream media is to die by the mainstream media.

No, to set the agenda we need our own full-spectrum alternative.

The established media can be used, of course. But, as shown with the last anti-Corbyn coup, Tom Watson's latest stunt and the Unite elections, when things really matter, we hardly get a look in. Indeed the capitalist press, radio and TV are an integral part of the ruling class establishment. There are, of course, siren voices to the contrary. Those who think we can win over *The Guardian*, the *Mirror*, etc. But, frankly, only the determinedly naive could not have anticipated the poisonous bias, the mockery, the hatchet-jobs, the implacable opposition.

Once we had the *Daily Herald*. Now we have nothing. Well, apart from the deadly dull trade union house journals, the advertising sheets of the confessional sects and the *Morning Star* (which is still in the grip of unreconstructed Stalinists).

We should aim for an opinion-forming daily paper of the labour movement and seek out trade union, cooperative, crowd and other such sources of funding. And, to succeed, we have to be brave - iconoclastic viewpoints, difficult issues, two-way arguments, must be included as a matter of course. The possibility of distributing it free of charge should be considered and, naturally, everything should be put up on the web without paywalls. We should also launch a range of internet-based TV and radio stations. With the abundant riches of dedication, passion and ideas that exist on the left here in Britain and far beyond, we can surely better the BBC, Al Jazeera, Russia Today and Sky.

Of course, the Jeremy Corbyn-John McDonnell leadership faces both an enemy without, in the PLP, and an enemy within, in their own reformist ideology. They seriously seem to believe that socialism can be brought about piecemeal, through a series of left and ever leftier Labour governments. In reality, though, a Labour government committed to the existing state and the existing constitutional order would produce not decisive steps in the direction of socialism, but attacks on the working class ... and then, as we have repeatedly seen, beginning with the January-November 1924 Ramsay MacDonald government, the re-election of the Tories ●

Notes

1. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/27/stoke-destroy-ukip-brexit-byelection.
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stoke-on-Trent_Central_by-election_2017.
3. Or its predecessor, Whitehaven - created in 1832 and renamed Copeland in 1983.
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copeland_by-election_2017.
5. www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/after-disappointment-copeland-labour-must-9916059.
6. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/feb/24/stoke-copeland-labour-remain-richmond-copeland-ukip.
7. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leader_of_the_Opposition_\(United_Kingdom\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leader_of_the_Opposition_(United_Kingdom)).

Momentum's flawed opposition

On March 11, Grassroots Momentum met at Conway Hall in central London. **Simon Wells and Carla Roberts** report

Over 200 Momentum members attended the first gathering of the newly established Momentum Grassroots network. It could have easily been much bigger, had it not been built as a 'delegate' event - a decision which was overturned at the beginning of the meeting by a clear majority of the branch delegates.

The organised left was there, of course: there were about two dozen members and supporters of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty/*The Clarion* and a handful each from Workers Power (*Red Flag*), Socialist Appeal and Labour Party Marxists. The Labour Representation Committee and Nick Wrack's Labour Party Socialist Network had a few members present, though neither seemed to make a coordinated intervention.

It is, of course, long overdue for the left within the Labour movement to start getting organised. But, on the day, GM's main political problem became more and more evident: it has been set up as a reaction to Jon Lansman's January 10 coup, when he simply abolished all elected Momentum bodies and imposed a bureaucratic constitution. All GM supporters are united in their opposition to this highly undemocratic manoeuvre. However, when it comes to the way forward, there were - at least - three different viewpoints present on March 11:

- Some want a clean split from Momentum - the sooner, the better. There are, naturally, differences over with whom to split, to form what exactly and on what political basis.

- Some want to continue to work in Momentum for now, while at the same time almost replicating the official body - with parallel structures and similar political limitations, but on a lower level: similar campaigns, similar leadership elections, etc.

- Some - and LPM belongs to this third group - agree that we should continue to work within Momentum for the time being, but with a clear understanding of its limited shelf life, openly criticising its exceedingly pinched political outlook and subordination to the politics of Jeremy Corbyn's 10 pledges.¹

How not to

Unfortunately, the conference made no attempt to clarify where GM as a whole might stand in relation to those three main options. In fact, we did not get a chance to discuss anything much at all, let alone serious politics.

To put it mildly, the organisation of the event was a shambles - reflecting, of course, the ideological and political poverty of much of the left. As is now common at such leftwing gatherings, we were presented with a stuffed agenda, which included speeches from strikers - but we had no time for a proper, meaningful discussion or decision-making. Of course, we support the Picturehouse workers' struggle for a living wage and are with the teaching assistants in Derby in their strike against the Labour council. But should the founding conference of GM really have devoted so much time to hearing their representatives, when contributions from the floor were limited to a measly two minutes?

An exception was made for Matt Wrack, leader of the Fire Brigades Union, who was allowed six minutes, but this was not enough to outline a set of serious proposals. Comrade Wrack had personally sponsored the conference with a "large contribution" - since his election as general secretary of the FBU, he said he had been "setting aside a portion of my wages to help fund the labour movement".

It would have helped if we had started the day with this comrade's contribution, but it was not until just before lunch that



Momentum Grassroots ... Matt Wrack speaking

he spoke. He explained that the FBU "continues to keep an open mind" about Momentum and Grassroots Momentum, but had so far declined the offer to take up a seat on Lansman's national coordinating group. He spoke about the need to democratise Labour, fight for the selection of socialist MPs and for socialist policies - and said that in fact "we are making almost no progress in any of these areas". He quite correctly stated that "the right is running rings around the left at conference" and "expulsions for political reasons are not being challenged". He was also right to say that "Corbyn will lose, unless he faces these challenges head on".

The biggest problem was the agenda, which really was the wrong way round. We were to discuss campaigns first, then democratising the Labour movement, and only then were we supposed to have a discussion on "the way forward for GM", including how to elect some kind of a leadership. This last item was supposed to last just over an hour and a half. But clearly there were a lot of disagreements in the hall.

What kind of leadership?

LPM supporter John Bridge successfully challenged the agenda and after lunch we went on to discuss the future of GM. This challenge turned out to be quite crucial, as that discussion went on for the rest of the day. Clearly, conference should have started with it. And maybe then we would have had time to debate this question politically, rather than just decide on a method of electing a new leadership.

On this issue, we were presented with three options, which were put together by the former chair of the (now abolished) conference arrangements committee, Alec Price - himself a supporter of option 2 (incredibly, he also started chairing the session, but after a challenge from the floor sat down again).

- **Option 1** was not very serious: keep things as they are, with the remaining members of Momentum's official national committee (also abolished), who were elected many months ago, continuing to meet. Only one or two people voted for this.

- **Option 2** was favoured by the ex-CAC members and was given by far the most time: local groups would affiliate to GM and send two representatives each to a leadership meeting every three months. Plus, conference was to directly elect a 'coordinating group' of six named positions. These two bodies would work together in

perfect harmony, with the national meeting of branch delegates supposedly being the superior committee. But this is obvious nonsense. In practice the six directly elected officers would be unaccountable little Bonapartes - an all too common practice on the left and fervently opposed by LPM. Much to the consternation of the top table, after a couple of recounts, option 2 was defeated, with 83 for and 89 against. Those who had already divvied up the six jobs between themselves were visibly stunned. For a good five minutes they literally did not know what to do.

- **Option 3** was textually the briefest and allowed for "15-20 people" elected at conference to form a "steering committee" that "can elect an executive if they wish". This was successfully carried with 88 for and 68 against.

In general, option 2 was supported by comrades who want a politically narrower leadership (specifically in this case excluding the AWL/*The Clarion*) - about half the conference. As we had no proper discussion on this issue: it was projected onto the 30-second (!) hustings contributions by the 40-plus candidates who put themselves forward for the 20 steering committee places. Without any consultation, let alone a vote, the chair announced that a least half the committee had to be female (ie, the quota system loved by liberal bureaucracies everywhere). And it was no surprise, especially given the numbers they had mobilised, that the AWL candidates did well. They make up around a quarter of the committee (that despite the fact that in the morning session they badly lost out when they spoke against the proposal to include in GM's basic platform opposition to the bogus 'anti-Zionism equals anti-Semitism' witch-hunt). And,

farcically, illustrating a lack of seriousness, two members of the steering committee almost instantly resigned from their posts (Joan Twelves and Rida Vaquas - the latter later withdrew her resignation!).

The left within Momentum is, though, surely split on the most crucial question before us: what it is we hope to achieve in the Labour Party.

Is it about following the masses into Labour and building this or that social movement? Is it about splitting off a leftwing minority to form the core of a future revolutionary 'party' - ie, one of the sects writ large? Is it about working for a Labour government and hoping that Jeremy Corbyn manages to hang on till 2020? Is it about fighting for a left-reformist Labour government that will carry out a limited range of progressive measures within the confines of the existing monarchical constitution?

Or, on the contrary, is it about transforming the Labour Party into a permanent united front of the entire organised working class - a party programmatically committed to republican democracy and armed with a new, socialist, clause four? If it is the latter - which is certainly the view of LPM - then this means recognising that taking such a course will ensure that Labour remains a party of extreme opposition for many years to come. We prefer that to forming a government that has no chance of carrying out the full programme of Marxism. Hence we envisage the taking of power not just in Britain in isolation, but as part of a worldwide movement of working class self-liberation that has Europe as its decisive point of departure.

There is clearly no real political coherence among the comrades involved in GM at this stage. This is something we shall seek to rectify through a process of debate, discussion and involvement in what should be our common struggle to influence Momentum's 22,000 members. This means that, in our view, GM should as a matter of tactic, not principle, remain a part of Momentum - just so long as we can make our voice heard within it and there are people there to listen.

That does *not* mean we politically subordinate ourselves to Jon Lansman or, for that matter, Jeremy Corbyn. Of course not. But, if we arm ourselves with principled politics, we will have the opportunity, in however limited a way, to win many thousands to the cause of socialism. For example, LPM secretary Stan Keable stood in the recent Momentum elections to the national coordinating group for the South East constituency. He won a respectable 458 votes on a Marxist platform, which included a strongly-worded condemnation of the Lansman coup, naturally. Where is the downside of that, exactly? ●

Notes

1. www.jeremyforlabour.com/economy.

Steering committee

The following were elected by Grassroots Momentum:

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| Matt Wrack, 137 | Rosie Woods, 71 |
| Sahaya James, 95 | Rida Vaquas, 69 |
| Tracy McGuire, 93 | Lee Griffiths, 69 |
| Jackie Walker, 93 | Alec Price, 67 |
| Nick Wrack, 89 | Pete Radcliff, 64 |
| Simon Hannah, 82 | Ed Whitby, 63 |
| Delia Mattis, 82 | Tina Werkmann, 61 |
| Kevin McKenna, 80 | Jan Pollock, 58 |
| Jill Mountford, 75 | Richard Gerrard, 56 |
| Graham Bash, 71 | Joan Twelves, 53 |

Further results: www.grassrootsmomentum.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Grassroots-Conference-Steering-Committee-Election-Results.pdf.

AIMS AND PRINCIPLES

1. The central aim of Labour Party Marxists is to transform the Labour Party into an instrument for working class advance and international socialism. Towards that end we will join with others and seek the closest unity of the left inside and outside the party.

2. Capitalism is synonymous with war, pollution, waste and production for its own sake. Attempts to rescue the system through Keynesian remedies are diversionary and doomed to fail. The democratic and social gains of the working class must be tenaciously defended, but capitalism must be superseded by socialism.

3. The only viable alternative is organising the working class into powerful and thoroughly democratic trade unions, co-ops, and other schools for socialism, and crucially into a political party which aims to replace the rule of the capitalist class with the rule of the working class.

4. The fight for trade union freedom, anti-fascism, women's rights, sexual freedom, republican democracy and opposition to all imperialist wars are inextricably linked to working class political independence and the fight for socialism.

5. Ideas of reclaiming the Labour Party and the return of the old clause four are totally misplaced. From the beginning the party has been dominated by the labour bureaucracy and the ideas of reformism. The party must be refounded on the basis of a genuinely socialist programme as opposed to social democratic gradualism or bureaucratic statism.

6. The aim of the party should not be a Labour government for its own sake. History shows that Labour governments committed to managing the capitalist system and loyal to the existing constitutional order create disillusionment in the working class.

7. Labour should only consider forming a government when it has the active support of a clear majority of the population and has a realistic prospect of implementing a full socialist programme. This cannot be achieved in Britain in isolation from Europe and the rest of the world.

8. Socialism is the rule of the working class over the global economy created by capitalism and as such is antithetical to all forms of British nationalism. Demands for a British road to socialism and a withdrawal from the European Union are therefore to be opposed.

9. Political principles and organisational forms go hand-in-hand. The Labour Party must become the umbrella organisation for all trade unions, socialist groups and pro-working class partisans. Hence all the undemocratic bans and proscriptions must be done away with.

10. The fight to democratise the Labour Party cannot be separated from the fight to democratise the trade unions. Trade union votes at Labour Party conferences should be cast not by general secretaries but proportionately according to the political balance in each delegation.

11. All trade unions should be encouraged to affiliate, all members of the trade unions encouraged to pay the political levy and join the Labour Party as individual members.

12. The party must be reorganised from top to bottom. Bring the Parliamentary Labour Party under democratic control. The position of Labour leader should be abolished along with the national policy forum. The NEC should be unambiguously responsible for drafting Labour Party manifestos.

13. The NEC should be elected and accountable to the annual conference, which must be the supreme body in the party. Instead of a tame rally there must be democratic debate and binding votes.

14. Our elected representatives must be recallable by the constituency or other body that selected them. That includes MPs, MEPs, MSPs, AMs, councillors, etc. Without exception elected representatives should take only the average wage of a skilled worker, the balance being donated to furthering the interests of the labour movement ●

What was Straight Left?

Lawrence Parker investigates the political origins of Jeremy Corbyn's director and deputy director of strategy and communications

When Jeremy Corbyn's campaigns chief Simon Fletcher quit last month, it was widely interpreted as a victory for Seumas Milne. Fletcher was known to have heated exchanges with Corbyn's director of strategy and communications on a range of issues, including Brexit. Now, Corbyn has signed up Steve Howell to be Milne's deputy. Howell's official job description is to help "oversee the leader's media strategy and to implement the communications grid". He is taking an indefinite leave of absence from his lobbying agency, Freshwater, to take up his role in the Labour leader's office.¹

There are unlikely to be heated exchanges between Milne and Howell not least because they are old friends and old Straight Leftist comrades. Andrew Murray, chief of staff for Unite and yet another former SL member, recently left the *Morning Star's* Communist Party of Britain to join Labour and is also thought to be in Corbyn's inner circle.

Origins

Straight Left's origins lie in the left, pro-Soviet oppositions that emerged in the Communist Party of Great Britain in the 1960s. In this period, a definite 'party within a party' existed, with figures such as Sid French, district secretary of Surrey CPGB, becoming key leaders. The general critique that came from this faction was a concern over the CPGB leadership distancing itself from the Soviet Union (such as around the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968) and other 'socialist' countries; a preference for a more 'workerist' identity (for example, the faction would have been happy with the CPGB's paper remaining as the *Daily Worker* in 1966) and a concentration on workplaces/trade unions; and a sense that the party was squandering its resources in futile election contests and alienating the left of the Labour Party, with whom it was meant to be developing a close relationship on the *British road to socialism* (BRS), the CPGB programme.

However, a significant part of the faction felt that the BRS was 'reformist' and 'revisionist' in all its guises from 1951, counterposing a revolutionary path to the parliamentary road to socialism envisaged in the CPGB's existing programme. This stance was clouded in ambiguity in many sections of the CPGB's left, with the default position usually being expressed in a preference for the 1951 version of the BRS that had been overseen by Stalin, as opposed to later versions modified by a 'revisionist' CPGB leadership. This opposition suffered a major split in the run-up to the CPGB's 1977 congress, with Sid French taking away 700 or so supporters to form the New Communist Party (after French realised that the CPGB's leadership was intent on a reorganisation of his Surrey district, which would have deprived him of his organisational bridgehead).

The rump left opposition in the CPGB coalesced around Fergus Nicholson (other key figures were John Foster, Brian Filling, Nick Wright, Susan Michie, Pat Turnbull and Andrew Murray), who had been the CPGB's student organiser until 1974. The *Straight Left* newspaper was launched in 1979, it was edited by Mike Toumazou and had Seumas Milne as business manager. Later a theoretical magazine, *Communist*, appeared. Membership figures are impossible to guess. However, judging from *Communist*, the faction did have a wide national infrastructure beyond London through the 1980s and was certainly on a par with, if not in some places more deeper rooted than, the other oppositional stream around the *Morning Star* (see below).

Factional infighting

The Straight Left group provoked a lot of

enmity from its factional rivals in the CPGB. Thus, Mike Hicks, who was involved in the Communist Campaign Group (CCG), set up after the rebellion of *Morning Star* supporters against the CPGB leadership in the mid-1980s, and later the first general secretary of the 1988 Communist Party of Britain split (both criticised and opposed by the Straight Leftist faction), said in the late 1990s: "Straight Left was neither straight nor left."² Similarly, a CCG document complained: "The individuals grouped around Straight Left have their own newspaper, their own organisation and their own objectives." I have been told anecdotally by CPGB activists of the time that Straight Left was thought to have three circles: an inner 'Leninist' core; a broader circle of sympathisers in the CPGB; and the 'softer' Labourite and trade unionists grouped around the *Straight Left* newspaper (non-CPGB trade unionists such as Alan Sapper and Labour MPs such as Joan Maynard were on its advisory board). Certainly, the majority of the content of the newspaper was hewn from the same, dry 'labour movement' template used by the *Morning Star*, with little indication that it was the work of communists, apart from its commentary on the Soviet Union and other international matters. (The *Communist* journal, obviously aimed at CPGB sympathisers, was much more orthodox and harder Marxist-Leninist in tone, with a lot of very interesting commentary on inner-party CPGB matters.)

So Straight Left was a faction and did indulge in political camouflage, but in this it was merely of its time. For example, the CCG's disavowal of Straight Left's factionalism was merely an attempt to throw people off the scent from the CCG's own factionalism (the CCG unconvincingly complained it was not a faction at all; just a group that wanted to follow the CPGB's rules - which fooled nobody). The CPGB was riddled with factions in the 1980s, not least those grouped around *Marxism Today* and the party machine.

Similarly, on Straight Left's broad left camouflage in its newspaper and other forums, this was the *modus operandi* of nearly the whole far left, from the *Morning Star* to various Trotskyist groups: ie, communists clothing their politics in everything from trade unionism to feminism and concealing their true aims in the pursuit of mass influence. Again, in hindsight, Straight Left does not strike one as very exceptional in this regard. In retrospect, the enmity aimed at it on these counts stands revealed as the product of mere factional rivalry.

However, another area of criticism aimed at Straight Left may have more mileage in terms of a lasting judgement. The group was deemed by its CPGB factional rivals (both in the CCG and the small group around *The Leninist*, forerunner of the *Weekly Worker*) to have a 'heads down' approach to CPGB work. In the words of the CCG, such an approach

counsels caution and compliance with the authority of the [CPGB's] executive committee. It says that if there is disagreement and dissatisfaction with the Eurocommunists [the faction then dominating the party's leadership], then opposition must be expressed and conducted via the normal party channels. That is to say, we must try at successive congresses to defeat and remove the Eurocommunists.⁴

This led to such notorious moves as Straight Leftists walking out with the CPGB leader, Gordon McLennan, when he

closed down a London district congress in November 1984 that threatened to become a point of opposition to the party leadership. Mike Hicks, in the chair of this meeting, later contemptuously observed that Straight Left "ended up selling *Marxism Today* [the CPGB theoretical journal much despised by the party's left in the 1980s for its Eurocommunist proclivities] instead of the *Morning Star* because the executive told them to"⁵

However, what this Straight Left strategy of avoiding open conflict eventually led to, in the context of a CPGB that was being set on a liquidationist course, was it being left somewhat high and dry. SL had built a considerable base in London by the end of the 1980s "by showing a willingness to take on responsibilities at a time when few candidates were to be found".⁶ This was to be a very hollow victory indeed, given that the CPGB was soon to pass into oblivion and the succession of congresses to win was coming to an end.

Labour Party

In terms of the Labour Party, Straight Left took the BRS injunction of developing an alliance with Labour to effect radical changes to its logical conclusion by arguing that the CPGB should affiliate to the Labour Party and - more controversially for both the left and right of the CPGB - that the party should end its independent electoral work. Thus a typical article in *Communist* argued:

... it is difficult to see there being much movement against the exclusion of communist trades unionists from the Labour Party until our electoral strategy is based on non-sectarian principles and imbued with a thoroughly consistent and positive attitude to the Labour Party.⁷

Thus Straight Left picked up clearly on the attitude of the pro-Soviet CPGB opposition of the 1960s, which consistently drew attention to the political impact of declining electoral votes on the avowed Labour-communist strategy of the party. However, this opened up Straight Left to jibes of 'liquidationism' from both left and right in the CPGB⁸ and, in retrospect, isolated the group further.

Soviet Union and 'socialist' countries

The Straight Left group, again showing its origins in the CPGB's pro-Soviet left of the 1960s, took an extremely uncritical view of the Soviet Union and other 'socialist' countries, and regarded the actions of the CPGB as a 'national' sin against the

'internationalist' probity of the Soviet Union's camp. Straight Left publications were filled with reprints from Soviet agencies such as Novosti and other agencies from the eastern bloc.

Thus, an article in *Communist* argued:

Communists in the capitalist world are not, in general, in a position to make the judgements that the CPSU is obliged to. Was it right or wrong to intervene in Afghanistan in 1979 to block the spread of counterrevolution? Is it right or wrong to withdraw the Soviet army from there today? The CPGB does not have to answer those questions. Our views are unimportant, and we do not have to live with the sharp consequences of the answers. The CPSU has to make those judgements, and it has the right to expect support and understanding in making them.⁹

Neither did this stance seemingly allow criticism of even the most crisis-stricken and sickly military dictatorships of countries such as Poland in the early 1980s. Straight Leftist Charlie Woods, complaining bitterly of CPGB criticisms of the Polish regime in 1983, said:

After all, how would our [CPGB] leadership take it if the over two-million-strong Polish United Workers Party took time off from trying to solve the problems of socialism to remonstrate with our 16,000-member party's failure to achieve it at all?¹⁰

The implication of this little homily being, of course, that those British communists really should not venture to criticise their Polish brethren at all.

Straight Left and gays

The group does not appear to have produced any significant material or statement on what would now be called LGBT questions (and an appeal from myself to its members to produce such a statement to clear this issue up, when

this article originally appeared online, yielded nothing).¹¹

Members of the group have claimed that calling their newspaper *Straight Left* was a boxing metaphor (and some of its members certainly knew a thing or two about physical tussles with gay protestors); while others have suggested that it was recycling an old *Sunday Worker* slogan from the mid-1920s,

when the CPGB was involved with the National Left Wing Movement: 'Labour's Straight Left'.

If it was the latter, it was a significant abuse of the slogan. The CPGB had this slogan to differentiate itself from traditional Labour lefts such as George Lansbury and the like: ie, those who were not 'straight', who would potentially disown communist allies and cosy up to the Labour right. It was not a slogan that covered the kind of homogenous 'broad left' that the likes of Straight Left advocated.

However, slogans can change their meaning with time. To call a newspaper *Straight Left* when your main factional opponents in the CPGB, the Eurocommunists, are keen on promoting gay rights, only invites some uncomfortable questions about your *modus operandi* on such issues. It is quite inconceivable that Fergus Nicholson and company were not aware that the name would be interpreted in this negative sense, particularly when it was the production of staunch advocates of the Soviet Union - a state with a problematic relation to homosexuality, to put it mildly.

To call all Straight Left members homophobic would be over-egging the pudding; to state that this group was one that had pronounced problems with homosexuality would not be stretching the truth ●

Notes

- Howell founded Freshwater in Cardiff in 1997 after working as a news reporter and producer for BBC Radio Wales. The 19-strong public affairs and PR agency now has offices in Cardiff and London. According to the APPC register, the firm's most recent clients include the multinational building materials company Tarmac and the personal injury lawyers Thomsons.
- F Beckett *Enemy within: the rise and fall of the British Communist Party* London 1998, p234. The accession of a group of ex-Straight Leftists (including Andrew Murray and Nick Wright, who had split from Straight Left to form Communist Liaison in the early 1990s) into the ranks of the Communist Party of Britain contributed to a bitter faction fight in the organisation, in which Hicks was eventually deposed as general secretary, and a strike by *Morning Star* staff.
- Communist Campaign Group *The crisis in the Communist Party and the way forward* (no date but circa 1985).
- Ibid.*
- F Beckett *op cit.*
- W Thompson *The good old cause: British communism 1920-1991* London 1992, p205.
- '40th congress of the Communist Party' *Communist* September 1987.
- For the right wing of the CPGB, see Dave Cook in the pre-congress discussion of 1981 (*Comment* October 17 1981); and, for the left, see Alan Stevens in the same context (*ibid.*).
- H Sanderson, 'Socialism today' *Communist* September 1988.
- C Woods *The crisis in our Communist Party: cause, effect and cure* 1983. Woods was a miner and party veteran from county Durham, who was expelled for writing this pamphlet - although he was very much viewed as a 'fall guy', with Fergus Nicholson or Brian Topping thought of as the more likely authors.
- This article originally appeared on the *Hatful of History* blog in October 2015. We are reproducing it here - in slightly amended form.



Steve Howell: friends at the top

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