

RED PAGES

Labour Party Conference 2017

produced by Labour Party Marxists



Brexit: To debate or not to debate?

Comrades should be wary of the 'Labour Campaign for Free Movement': many of its leading lights *do not* support the free movement of labour

If the anti-Semitism furore in the party has shown one thing, it illustrates that the developing fault lines between left and right in the party produce some strange configurations.

Conference has been seeing an odd debate/non-debate around Brexit. The Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) and Momentum really did not want this thorny question discussed at conference and urged delegates *not* to choose the issue in Sunday's priorities ballot. (This decides which 'themes' are allocated time for discussion).

The CLPD argued that, "it serves no purpose to debate the different views on Brexit at this stage. The NEC's statement and the plenary session on Monday morning are quite enough at the moment. We should try and limit the damage the right can inflict upon conference", as Barry Gray said at the CLPD fringe meeting on Saturday.

Ranged against them, you have the Alliance for Workers' Liberty (in formal terms, also on the left) who sided with none other than Labour First's Luke Akehurst to urge delegates to vote *in favour* of a Brexit debate.

As a general principle, Marxists argue that organisations in the workers'

movement should be able to have frank and transparent discussions on any issue, even uncomfortable ones. Political differences should not be viewed as a problem *per se*. A thinking organisation will always have disputes, and it is almost always right to argue them out publicly.

We need to be concrete, however. Labour First and Akehurst wanted this issue discussed because they perceive Corbyn and the left are vulnerable on it. For instance, at the Labour First rally on Sunday, the CLP delegates in the audience were strongly urged to give their first vote in the priorities ballot to a debate on Brexit. Apart from any other considerations, it was given this importance by LF because Momentum is politically fractured on the issue, with deep disagreements between its "Stalinist" and "Trotskyist" factions. (LPM comrades who braved the wrath of the angry rightists at this gathering report that our organisation also warranted a few mentions from the platform. None complimentary – though we would have been mortally offended if any were, of course.)

So, the right has correctly identified Europe as one of Jeremy's weak spots.

While the Labour leader has been reasonably successful in simply standing back and giving the Tory government sufficient Brexit rope to hang itself, the Labour Party's position is hardly coherent or convincing. Thus, Labour First, Progress and the whole rightwing gang in the party are jostling for a chance to attack Corbyn on the issue and show him up for the benefit of their allies in the yellow press. Concretely, therefore, the demand for a debate on Brexit is a rightwing tactic, another attempt to beat up Corbyn and his allies.

Balance of forces

Thankfully, they have not succeeded: during Sunday's priorities ballot, conference voted overwhelmingly to follow the advice given by CLPD and Momentum. Contemporary motions on Brexit will *not* be discussed, after that subject received 72,000 CLP votes. As a comparison: The NHS and housing received 187,000 votes each, social care 145,000 and the railways 120,000. This gives a useful snapshot of the balance of forces at this year's conference.

Mindful of this background, it may **continued on p2**

Today's issue: MONDAY 25/09

- Success: National Policy Forum's disputed formulation on Israel/Palestine is amended
- Dozens join protest against Iain McNicol outside conference



seem strange that an ostensibly left organisation like the Alliance for Workers' Liberty should prioritise building a campaign ('Labour Campaign for Free Movement') that offers platforms to the likes of Tulip Siddiq (who in January resigned as a shadow minister following Jeremy Corbyn's decision to impose a three-line whip on Labour MPs to vote in favour of triggering Article 50) and Clive Lewis MP, who has of course spoken out *against* free movement.

In response to Jeremy Corbyn stating publicly that he saw "no need" to curb immigration or impose more controls, Lewis said: "We have to acknowledge that free movement of labour hasn't worked for a lot of people. It hasn't worked for many of the people in this country, where they've been undercut, who feel insecure, who feel they're not getting any of the benefits that im-

migration has clearly had in our economy."

Now, it would be foolish in the extreme to argue – in the manner of a sect like the Socialist Worker Party – that mass immigration always and everywhere brings unalloyed economic benefits and social harmony to indigenous working class communities. However, this in no way implies that we should oppose the right of working people to free movement; to be able to seek a life for themselves and their families in any part of the world they choose.

Voluntary unity

The key is unity, won from below. We need to fight for the integration of migrants into the culture of struggle of a native working class (a reciprocal process of learning, of course), into common organisation and unity against our class enemies.

This voluntary, combative unity is a million miles away from what the likes of Clive Lewis advocate when they call for obligatory union membership for migrant workers (as a precondition of their right to enter the country) to stop them "undercutting wages" – a proposal motivated, he admits, by his core concern to "have an impact on the number of people coming to this country", to "make it more difficult for employers to

bring people in" and thus to push companies to "begin to take people more often from this country". Fairly bog-standard Brit nationalism masquerading as 'internationalism', in other words.

The very fact of the AWL's involvement in the 'Labour Campaign for Free Movement' should set alarm bells ringing for Labour comrades. This is an organisation infamous for arguing *against* the right of Palestinian people to free movement – concretely the right to return to areas they were forcibly ejected from by the colonialist Israeli state.

Among their leaders are people who are happy to call themselves "Zionists" and this softness on reaction saw them support the purging of Jackie Walker as vice-chair of Momentum. Their 'fellow traveller' on the Labour Party NEC, Rhea Wholfson, voted to refer Jackie Walker's case to Iain McNicol's compliance unit – and happily speaks at meetings organised by the Jewish Labour Movement, an affiliate to the World Labour Zionist Movement, a loyal supporter of the state of Israel and home to many of those who have been so keen to save the Labour Party from its 'unelectable' leader.

This campaign needs to be given a very wide berth. As with every other issue and debate in the Labour Party these days, context is everything.



Strange bedfellows: We caught Luke Akehurst (Labour First) buying a copy of the AWL's *Clarion* magazine

We need a positive vision for Europe, not a pro-business one

Keir Starmer has succeeded in getting the shadow cabinet to come out in favour of staying in the single market (though in an interview on the *Andrew Marr Show* on Sunday morning, Jeremy Corbyn seemed to backtrack somewhat from this again). Still, there remains a striking paradox. On Europe, Labour is articulating the interests of big capital. Not that big capital will reciprocate and back the Labour Party. It is, after all, led by Jeremy Corbyn: pro-trade union, pacifistic and a friend of all manner of unacceptable leftists.

For the sake of appearances, Keir Starmer pays lip service to the 2016 referendum result. There is no wish to alienate the *minority* of Labour voters who backed 'leave'. More through luck than judgement, ambiguity served the party well during the general election campaign. The contradiction between Corbyn's historical hostility towards the EU – now represented in the Commons by the Dennis Skinner-Kelvin Hopkins rump – and the mass of

Labour's pro-'remain' members and voters resulted in a fudge.

However, instead of getting embroiled in the argument about what is and what is not in the 'national interest' – eg, staying in the single market versus leaving the single market – Labour needs a class perspective. We should have no illusions in the European Union. It is a bosses' club, it is by treaty committed to neoliberalism and it is by law anti-working class (note the European Court of Justice and its Viking, Laval and Rüffert judgements). But nor should we have any illusions in a so-called Lexist perspective.

On the contrary the EU should be seen as a site of struggle. We should aim to unite the working class in the EU in order to end the rule of capital and establish socialism on a continental scale. That would be the biggest contribution we can make to the global struggle for human liberation.



Protest against Iain McNicol

LPMers happily joined the 30 or so protestors outside Labour Party conference this morning to demand that general secretary Ian McNicol should resign (actually, he should be sacked!). Not only is McNicol responsible for the suspensions and expulsions of thousands of leftwing Labour Party members, he is also in the frame for attempts to sabotage Labour's electoral challenge in June's snap election. He and other right wingers were clearly hoping for a Labour result so dire that Jeremy Corbyn would have to fall on his sword. Thus, many CLPs were woefully under-resourced and a large number received not a single penny. (For example, Sheffield Hallam, where the pro-Corbyn left managed to oust Lib Dem luminary Nick Clegg and win the first ever Labour MP in the constituency, received precisely *zip* from either the region or HQ).

The rightwing response to the protest was predictable. Johanna Baxter expressed to conference her tremulous outrage at this protest and railed that a demo against "an employee of the party should not be allowed". Deservedly, she was booed.

Of course, the issue wasn't really Ian McNicol's employment rights, but Baxter's solidarity with his politics. Before she was booted off the NEC last year, she managed to use the then wafer-thin right wing majority on the NEC to push through changes to give Wales and Scotland two extra NEC seats. This was not prompted by democratic concerns around regional devolution. No, Baxter was confident that the vacancies would be filled by supporters of the right in the party.

Subsequently, of course, Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale has resigned and been replaced (temporarily) by leftwing deputy leader Alex Rowley. This produced a small left NEC majority. In turn, this was enough to push through the 'Corbyn review' and expand the CLP representation from six to nine, producing a leftwing majority on our leading body for the near future. Clearly, the right is in some pain. Happy days!

Labour First rally: all about Marxism

The crowd at the Labour First rally on Sunday afternoon was a pretty riled up bunch. Luke Akehurst and his mates are clearly feeling under pressure from leftwing delegates at this year's Labour Party conference ... and they are not handling the stress at all well. The chair launched an attack on LPM as "not real Labour" - unlike the rows of Tory-lite manikins in the hall, for whom genuine Labour principles are as expendable as autumn leaves. Furthermore, our very name is a "a contradiction in terms" - a short course in dialectics might clear up any confusion.

The ever-delightful John Mann MP scowled at our comrades, but didn't deign to speak to them - presumably because there were no cameras nearby. However, he did prevail upon a minion to pick up a copy of the latest issue of *Labour Party Marxists Bulletin*.

Not surprisingly, given the general election result and Jeremy's huge spike in popularity and profile, Luke Akehurst and his chums didn't attack Corbyn directly. Instead, they concentrated their attacks on his supporters - the organised Corbynistas particularly. These were "Stalinists" who "fetishise military dictatorships" like Venezuela and Cuba. The June poll was run down, however - "We have even fewer seats than under Neil Kinnock", Chris Leslie MP complained. He went on to illustrate his encyclopaedic ignorance of Marxism, which he dismissed as a "destructive, hate filled ideology". In comments that must have shocked many in the audience, he also revealed that Marxism is "revolutionary" and wants to "overturn capitalism" (well spotted).

Akehurst suggested that the Labour Party should "purge the Anti-

Semites" (for this, read "the left") and "stand up to the bullies" (that is, "silence all criticism of the right"). Pretty classic - and pathetic - tactics of bureaucrats who are politically incapable of answering critics and are aware the game is moving away from them. For instance, in one of his more honest moments, Akehurst had to acknowledge that the right's forces are now too weak to "stop the McDonnell amendment".

Success! NPF document on Israel/Palestine is amended

The National Policy Forum is a relic of the dark days of Blairism; a body Blair established to outsource the party's policy-making. When it published its dire, 90-page annual report in June, Palestine campaigners quickly noticed a glaring omission. The 2017 election manifesto called for an end to Israel's blockade, illegal occupation and settlements. But these basic democratic demands had been dropped from the NPF document, along with the pledge that "A Labour government will immediately recognise the state of Palestine".

Had conference supported this document, it would have overridden the pledges in the manifesto, as conference is – at least on paper – the sovereign decision-making body of the party. This omission was no 'oversight'. Campaigners went into overdrive; LPM joined others calling on delegates to refer back this section of the document.

But page 14 of yesterday's Conference Arrangements Committee report includes, without explanation, this small paragraph:

"The following text, as agreed in the Labour Party Manifesto 2017, is now included in the National Policy Forum Annual Report 2017. On page 56, column 2, line 43, add:

'There can be no military solution to this conflict and all sides must avoid taking action that would make peace harder to achieve. That means both an end to the blockade, occupation and settlements, and an end to rocket and terror attacks. Labour will continue to press for an immediate return to meaningful negotiations leading to a diplomatic resolution. A Labour government would immediately recognise the state of Palestine.'"

It is not the kind of programme we would write on the Middle East (there is clearly a tendency to equate the violence of the oppressor state Israel with the struggle of the oppressed Palestinian people - note the mention of "rocket attacks"). But a return to the original formulation is a victory against those (like the Jewish Labour Movement) who want us to take the side of the Israeli state. The fact that the JLM has perversely been given the 'best practice award' by Ian McNicol serves as a reminder of how well connected this organisation is to the party bureaucracy.

CAC: Death throes of the right

The Conference Arrangements Committee reported two records: there have never been so many delegates at Labour Party conference - almost 1,200. And over 1,000 of these are first timers. Of course, that reflects the tremendous sea change within the party. But it also presents the left with a problem. We have the numbers, but we do not have the organisation yet to halt the undemocratic shenanigans by the right.

Take the CAC, which is still dominated by the old guard. Their report on Sunday morning provoked angry responses from conference floor. Two disputed issues should really have led to votes being taken to refer the report back; but the left was not organised enough to see this challenge through.

First was the CAC's sneaky move to provide time for London mayor Sadiq Khan to address conference, although this is clearly not within the CAC's remit. The NEC had previously decided not to allow any of the city mayors to speak, to give more space for delegates to contribute. Once the CAC had made its invitation public, the NEC caved in, presumably for fear of media ridicule and scathing headlines. If Khan uses his allotted time to undermine Corbyn or belittle the scale of the party's achievement in June, then we trust delegates will not be shy about voicing disapproval.

The other issue is related to the CAC's implementation of last year's rule change to allow the partial reference back of National Policy Forum documents. Any delegate can now challenge part of the NPF's (extremely long-winded) documents and demand that the issue is revisited by the body. Of course, if the chair is happy with a challenge, s/he will simply "ask conference if the reference back is agreed", as it says in the CAC report.

However, if the chair is not happy about the issue in dispute, then it will be up the person chairing that session to decide if a vote is conducted by show of hands *or* by a card vote.

The difference between the two is

crucial. The unions and other affiliates have 300 delegates at conference, the CLPs have sent 1,200. But in a card vote, the affiliates' vote counts for 50% of the total vote, ditto the CLPs' vote (which is then further divided according to how many members a CLP has). Roughly, a union delegate's vote counts four times as much as the vote of a CLP delegate – and that can make all the difference in a dispute.

This chair's discretion over the format of voting is within the current rules, but normal practice in recent years – when it comes to reference back of a CAC report, composite motions etc – has been to allow any delegate to make a call for a card vote, which the chair is then obliged to accept.

This posed almost no problem in the Blairite period of the party: real disputes were absent from conference floor, which had become a tedious, stage-managed affair. The election of Jeremy Corbyn has changed all that. Last year, a huge row broke out at conference over the NEC's "reform package" that snuck in two additional NEC seats for the leaders of Welsh and Scottish Labour. Delegates were on their feet, shouting "card vote, card vote" – but the chair simply refused and declared that the hand vote had "clearly won". In a card vote, the result would have gone the other way, as the unions were firmly against the addition of two right wingers.

This shows how important it is for the left to show its muscle in every party arena – including the middle layers of the party bureaucracy, of which the CAC is a part. Yes, Momentum and CLPD successfully campaigned for two leftwingers, Billy Hayes and Seema Chandwani, to be elected onto the committee by direct ballot of the membership. But the CAC is made up of seven members, five of whom will be elected by other methods. Therefore, we are not entirely confident that the left will actually be running next year's conference.

contact Labour Party Marxists

mobile at conference: 07817 379 568

membership: secretary@labourpartymarxists.org.uk

web stuff: office@labourpartymarxists.org.uk

Donate: Account 'LPM'. Sort: 09-01-27. Account: 04305510

Labour Party Marxists, BCM Box 8932, London WC1N 3XX



