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How to get rid of Tom Watson

With his much-publicised motion to abolish the position of deputy leader, Momentum's owner Jon Lansman was trying to pose left - but don't be fooled

The rather startling news broke late on Friday, September 20, that Momentum's Jon Lansman had proposed a motion to Labour's National Executive Committee that would effectively abolish the position of deputy leader of the party – and thus give the treacherous incumbent, Tom Watson, the bum's rush. It came as a surprise to all of us, not least Watson himself who commented that he “got a text in a Chinese restaurant to say they were abolishing me.”

This unexpected development initially divided opinion amongst Labour lefties and a rather confused debate ensued on discussion lists. There was a general consensus that Lansman's dramatic move was not sincere – the man has played a despicable role in the party since the election of Corbyn and snuffed out democracy in the organisation he lords over. Under his leadership Momentum nationally has politically degenerated to what looks like the point of no return. (Although, of course, there remain good comrades and principled branches in the organisation, doing useful socialist work.)

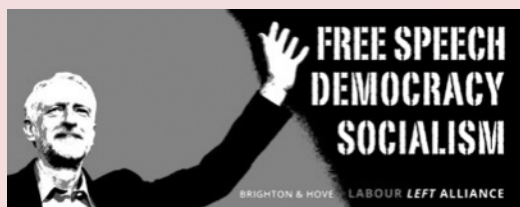
It is probably not necessary to remind readers of this bulletin of Jon Lansman's entire shabby record, but particularly grotesque was the recent attack on Jewish Voice for Labour as “not being part of the Jewish community” and his demand that Chris Williamson MP should be summarily expelled from the Labour Party. Sadly, Momentum at a national

level has become an organisation that has fully joined the witch-hunt against Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters.

However, while there were no illusions from any section of the Labour left that the Momentum supremo had experienced some sort of socialist epiphany, this odd initiative by Lansman revealed a worrying conservatism on the part on some comrades. For example, leading figures in the Labour Representation Committee were very critical of Labour Party Marxist comrades who celebrated the opportunity – no matter how it had landed in our lap and however unlikely it was to win – to show Watson the door. Strangely, this was castigated as evidence of being in thrall to the bureaucracy, an example of “top down socialism”. In supposed contrast, our critics upheld the need for “a mass socialist movement from below” as the only way to see Watson off.

It seemed to have escaped these (often very experienced) comrades that Corbyn himself initially began his journey to the leadership of the Labour Party not as a result of a mass movement from below – it was gifted to him by the stupidly misplaced largess of the “morons”, as one of their number self-defined in retrospect. A mass movement was the *result* of this top-table blunder, not its cause. Posturing left and counter-posing an *imaginary* mass

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- Why the demand for the abolition of all private schools is not as radical as it sounds
- Launch of 'Free Speech events' with Chris Williamson MP and Jackie Walker

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movement to this concrete, totally unexpected political opportunity would have been idiotic.

Tom Watson denounced the challenge to his position as a “drive-by-shooting”. The murder weapon turned out to be was a pea-shooter, however. On September 20, the NEC ruled that the Lansman motion was out of order as it did not command a two thirds majority. It was referred to the NEC's meeting on September 21, where Lansman apparently then withdrew it – after a typically supine, Ghandi-style intervention from Jeremy Corbyn, we are told. (*Huffington Post* reports that the mere threat of Watson's removal had prompted 35 members of the Parliamentary Labour Party to sign up to demand another leadership challenge if Lansman's motion passed. Clearly, Corbyn's serial capitulations to the right win nothing from them in return apart from contempt.)

Some comrades have dubbed this rather odd moment as little more than “grandstanding” on Lansman's part. There is a little more to it than that, however.

Lansman's uncharacteristic lurch left can also be plausibly explained as a reaction to pressure from the internal dissent of Momentum members, the general loss of forward impetus the organisation has experienced and – crucially - the impressive growth of the Labour Left Alliance, a principled organisation of the democratic left that opposes the ‘Anti-Zionism equals Anti-Semitism’ smear campaign in the Labour Party.

While the LLA does *not* call for individuals or branches to split from Momentum, the mere fact of a new kid on the block – with the aspiration for members' democracy, an accountable leadership, and a militant determination to stand up to the foul smears and persecution against the Labour left – might well have spurred Lansman to butch up politically to engerise and enthuse his rank-and-file. Of course, if this *is* true, it casts the leader of Momentum



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Abolish all private schools?

In the last few days much has been written in the mainstream media about a proposal before conference to “abolish independent schools”. It has also been widely reported that John McDonnell is fully behind it. However, things are not quite so simple.

The main motion on the subject - proposed initially by three CLPs: Battersea, Bolton and Southport - is headed “Labour Against Private Schools”, which is also the name of a campaigning group.

The motion points to the gross inequality and privilege that emanates from institutions such as Eton and Harrow - for example, while only around 7% of children attend private schools, something like 50% of judges, government ministers and university vice-chancellors - not to mention “news columnists” - were educated outside the state sector. The motion adds that “The ongoing existence of private schools is incompatible with Labour’s pledge to promote social justice” and calls on the party’s general election manifesto to include “a commitment to integrate all private schools into the state sector”.

However, when it comes to the concrete measures needed to bring about such ‘integration’, these are limited to the “withdrawal of charitable status and all other public subsidies and tax privileges”. In fact, according to the motion, Labour should “ensure universities admit the same proportion of private school students as in the wider population”. In other words, private schools would *not* be abolished.

Neither does John McDonnell call for abolition. In his comment in favour of the motion, he points out how “our society is grotesquely unequal”, some of which derives from “inequalities in education”. He correctly states that in public schools “large amounts of money are spent on a privileged few”, but he does not go beyond what is stated in the motion.

In fact there is also another motion, proposed by Isle of Wight, which calls on Labour to “place all private schools into local authority ownership and control”, but this is part of a much broader set of policies dealing with education as a whole - including, for instance, the abolition of “academies, academy trusts and free schools” - so it does not go into detail on what exactly would happen to private schools once they were under “local authority ownership and control”. Would they still charge fees, for example?

Despite this lack of clarity, it is clear that these motions should be supported. But what should Marxists say about the abolition of *all* schools outside the state sector? **What about, say, those run by cooperatives? Those that are based on a working class, socialist vision of society - as opposed to the pro-capitalist, nationalistic ideology that underlies official state education?**

In our view such schools would be a *step forward* and should be fully supported. There is nothing inherently progressive in the state as such - under capitalism it *serves the interests* of the elite first and foremost.

Debate over Clause four

Fight for *real* socialism!

Clause four, rewritten under Tony Blair in 1995, carries a totemic status for both the right and left. Therefore it was correct to support the rule change that would have reinstated the old Fabian 1918 clause four, striking a blow against the Blairite right. The NEC, however, sensing that this might well have gotten a majority, suggested to set up a 'working group' instead. Jim Kennedy, chair of the Organisation Committee, assured the movers: "Rest assured, your voices will be heard". We shall see.

The actual motion by Rochford and Southend East, Doncaster Central, and Wallasey (and inspired by Socialist Appeal) falls *far* short of what is required - leaving most of the existing clause four untouched. For instance, it upholds the current international order by talking about how Labour is "committed to the defence and security of the British people" and "cooperating in European institutions, the United Nations, the Commonwealth and other international bodies" (presumably including Nato).

Frankly, we need to be far more radical about our vision for the future. The old Fabian clause formulations, especially the crucial fourth - "to secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry" - are too often celebrated as being a defining socialist moment. Yet, when first mooted in November 1917 - amidst the slaughter of inter-imperialist war - Sidney Webb, its principle author, had no thought of promoting genuine socialism. He wanted a government of experts, elections existing merely to ratify their enlightened decisions.

Top leaders of the Fabian Society, including HG Wells and George Bernard Shaw, considered themselves social engineers of the highest order. The role of these very clever people was to slowly and courteously persuade the great and the good of the benefits of 'socialism'.

Naturally, Marxists have always opposed Fabianism. Fredrick Engels showed particular contempt for this "well-meaning gang of eddicated middle class folk". For them,

Engels concluded, "fear of revolution is their guiding principle."

The working class was to be lifted out of their ignorance - with the unruly sections herded into "human sorting houses" to be trained for work. The Fabians were also ardently pro-imperialists. The British empire was portrayed as a benevolent bringer of democracy and a saviour of the 'lower breeds'. Naturally, come the 1914-18 great war, the Fabians did their best to serve the imperial cause. Europe had to be saved from the Junkers and Prussian militarism.

But then the October Revolution shook the whole capitalist world to its very foundations. Bourgeois politicians rushed to make concessions. Hence, Sidney Webb cynically calculated that his clause four socialism could be used to *divert* the considerable rank-and-file sympathy that existed for the Russian Revolution into safe and peaceful constitutional channels. Obviously, clause four socialism had to be implicitly anti-Marxist: the Fabians consciously sought to ameliorate the mounting contradictions between labour and capital ... and thus put off socialism.

Nevertheless, the Blairising of clause four in 1995 was hugely symbolic. Socialism was declared dead. By sacrificing the old clause four in the full glare of publicity, Blair and his clique sought to appease the establishment, the City, the Murdoch empire, the global plutocracy. Capitalism would be *absolutely* safe in their hands.

Riding high in the opinion polls, Blair inaugurated a series of internal 'reforms'. Conference was gutted. No longer could it debate issues, vote on policy or embarrass the leadership in front of the media. Instead the whole thing became a revolting rubber-stamping exercise.

Demands for a return of the old clause four are perfectly understandable. But why go back to a Fabian past? Instead we should persuade members and affiliates to take up an implicitly Marxist alternative.

Brighton Labour Left Alliance has pulled off an amazing feat by setting up a range of events on the theme of 'Freedom of Speech' during Labour Party conference. On Saturday, almost 100 activists packed into an upstairs room in the Rialto Theatre. Greg Hadfield, the key organiser of these events, spoke of the threats made against a number of venues booked by the left, leading to their cancellation. It says a great deal for his determination and courage, and that of his Brighton comrades, that we were able to listen to militant speeches from Ann Mitchell (chair of Brighton Palestine Solidarity Campaign), Tina Werkmann (Labour against the Witchhunt), Jackie Walker and Chris Williamson. The efforts of the witch-hunters had the opposite effect intended.



Chris Williamson spoke of his determination to continue to speak out honestly and to fight oppression, and of his determination that he would not be cowed, even if he was reinstated. Tina Werkmann warned of the rule change by the NEC which fast tracks expulsions. The right-wing are determined to destroy the left. But they have a gift on their hands.

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Events will continue all week, check out www.labouragainsthewitchhunt.org.

Rule change debate

How to make the witch-hunt worse

Saturday's so-called debate on rule changes to Labour's constitution was shambolic. It highlighted the huge democratic deficit at conference. The chair raced through the 27 rule changes and delegates only got to see the seven NEC proposals that very morning, as part of the 225 page report of the Conference Arrangements Committee.

About a dozen CLPs withdrew their motions on conference floor, most by not moving them. There is a logic here. Given the NEC opposed pretty much all rule changes that were not their own, chances of a majority for a CLP proposal were slim. There are dire consequences for a rule change if voted down at conference: It not only falls, but the subject cannot be revisited by conference for three years. Ironically, one of the rule changes not moved was an attempt by East Devon CLP (card vote 10) to reform this undemocratic rule by adding that motions supported by at least five CLPs should be discussed in subsequent conferences.

Withdrawing motions – when it is clear they will not get a majority – can therefore be a good tactic to allow the subject to come back next year. However, we cannot understand why comrades – apart from a few – did not use their three-minute time slot to withdraw in an orderly fashion by explaining the motivation behind their motion.

It was particularly sad that delegates from Ceredigion CLP and Enfield Southgate CLP (card votes 15 and 16) did not make use of their time slots. Both put forward rule changes which sought to make the disciplinary process more transparent, enshrine the right to appeal and ensure that cases are dealt with promptly. Speakers could have bolstered the powerful speeches in opposition to card vote 6, the NEC's proposals on the disciplinary process.

As we go to press, the outcome of the card vote on this and other rule changes is not known – but we presume all NEC proposals went through and all others were defeated.

Card vote 6 makes sweeping reforms to the disciplinary process. Momentum – on the wrong side of the debate once again – urged supporters in its delegate briefings to vote for the proposals, because “these changes are central to improving the Party's disciplinary system.”

The new rules certainly tighten the system. For example, until now suspended members were able to participate in their branch meetings (“unless the reason for the suspension in part or in full is their conduct in party meetings”) and were allowed to attend any CLP meetings “to participate in ballots.” This has now been abolished.

However, the most important change is on “fast track

expulsions”. The NEC has given itself the right to arbitrarily expel members judged irredeemable. The key paragraph reads:

“The NEC and NCC shall not have regard to the mere holding or expression of beliefs and opinions *except* in any instance inconsistent with the Party's aims and values, agreed codes of conduct, or involving prejudice towards any protected characteristic.”

Supposedly, this formulation is *the* magic bullet that will finally end the anti-Semitism smear campaign in Labour. The rule change that will *finally* appease the right wing in and outside the party and end their relentless campaign against Corbyn.

Of course, this will not work.

The Jewish Labour Movement complained immediately that they had not been consulted (enough). Sure enough, Mike Katz – opposing card vote 6 – commented during the debate that “our relationship is at an all time low”. The “Jewish community” (defined by who?) and the JLM have asked for “independence and this does not deliver it. We don't trust the NEC to deliver fast track justice.”

The next speaker, Duncan Shipley Dalton, found himself in the “strange position that I agree with the previous speaker, [we should] strongly oppose card vote 6. We believe in natural justice. It is a travesty of justice. Adopting the IHRA didn't solve the problem and this will not solve it either.” Quite right.

Maggi Cosin, former chair of the National Constitutional Committee (which richly deserves its nickname, the ‘National Kangaroo Court’) spoke against sidelining the NCC and assured the audience that the current manifestation of this body ticked all the required boxes. However, the power to expel members in the hands of the NEC – in current conditions – is no good either. Contrary to the media's febrile imagination, the NEC is not dominated by the ‘left’ (even if you include Jon Lansman in that category).

Labour HQ seems set on a path of self-destruction. The leadership's fast track expulsions is a green light for a tsunami of allegations against Labour members, with the prospect – given the low standards of ‘evidence’ generally required – of 1,000s more vexatious allegations.

We need to reiterate the truth about this McCarthyite witch-hunt. Comrades like Jackie Walker, Chris Williamson, Stan Keable *et al* are simply collateral damage. The specific target is Corbyn and the general aim is to put the left “back in its box”, as one despicable rightwing Labour MP put it in a rare moment of candour.

The current tactics of Corbyn and his allies will more or less guarantee our defeat. Appeasement never works.

“Adopting the IHRA didn't solve the problem and this will not solve it either”

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Launch of Free Speech events
with Chris Williamson and Jackie Walker

