

RED PAGES

● Labour Party Conference 2017 ●

produced by Labour Party Marxists



Don't relax - now the real work begins!

This conference was certainly historic: almost 1,200 delegates and 13,000 visitors made this the largest Labour conference ever. It was also very left-wing, at least in its composition. There are lots of things the left can celebrate:

- We defeated attempts by the right to portray Corbyn supporters as anti-Semites. Clearly designed to shut up the left, it achieved exactly the opposite effect: there were dozens of speakers at conference who spoke out against the right wing's vile witch-hunt and in favour of the rights of Palestinians. This ran like a red thread through conference.

- Pressure from below (and perhaps Corbyn?) forced the Conference Arrangements Committee to re-insert Labour's support for the Palestinian cause into the National Policy Forum's report.

- Labour First and Progress played no role at conference - and were visibly upset about it: their dismissal of the majority of new members as "naïve" and their rants against the Marxist "bullies" show that they have their backs against the wall.

But conference business itself was still firmly in the hands of the right:

- There were no real debates on anything. The documents produced by the National Policy Forum (to which Tony Blair outsourced policy making) are full of waffle and without any concrete policies. Contemporary motions were distributed way too late and, once merged, were too vague and non-committal.

- The NEC exercised a lot of pressure on delegates to remit *all* their rule change proposals in favour of the 'Party Democracy Review', even those that do not fall

in the review's remit. Conference should have had a chance to properly debate and vote on, say, the McDonnell amendment, the need to abolish the 12 months delay affecting CLP rule changes and the fight to democratise Young Labour.

- About a third of contemporary motions were ruled out of order by the CAC, including some that wanted to end British weapons exports to Saudi-Arabia, because a NPF document touches on the issue.

Clearly, the left still has a long way to go in its fight to transform the Labour Party. For a start, conference must become the sole, sovereign decision-making body of the party and the NPF should be abolished. It is an instrument to stop members from shaping party policy.

The next 12 months are going to be crucial in our fight to democratise the party and take it out of the hands of people like Iain McNicol. It is the bureaucratic middle layer that has been resisting reforms; the top and the bottom are now firmly in the hands of the left:

- With the addition of three more members chosen by CLPs, the NEC will have a (slim) left-wing majority.

- The new CAC (in office for two years), has a pro-Corbyn majority: Seema Chandwani and Billy Hayes were elected by the membership; two more seats are held by the Unite union.

- The so-called 'Corbyn review' will be run by Katy Clarke, Claudia Webbe and Andy Kerr - all in the Corbyn camp.

This gives us an unprecedented opportunity to transform the party. However! We urge Labour Party members not to rely on Jeremy Corbyn and his allies on

the NEC to sort things out for them. Corbyn has relented to pressure from the right on too many issues, be it the 'anti-Semitism scandal', Trident or free movement. Corbyn and his allies seem to believe that the saboteurs can be pacified and 'party unity' consolidated by giving ground on these issues. This is dangerously naive. The outcome of the Chakrabarti enquiry shows the opposite to be true. The witch-hunters' appetites grow in the eating.

Members need to exercise as much pressure as possible over two concrete issues arising from conference:

1. **The Corbyn review** must be as democratic and wide-ranging as possible. Clearly, the party is ripe for radical reform. Branches must be invited to have their views heard - and then implemented! The review could easily become a pseudo-democratic exercise, where people send in their thoughts and we end up with another compromise between the left and the right. This is, of course, the way the NPF currently works.

2. **The NEC compromise** on 'prejudice' is a fudge. The worst excesses of the Jewish Labour Movement's rule change have been removed. But its fingerprints are all over the compromise and they are trying to enshrine in the new code of conduct the controversial 'Working Definition of Anti-Semitism', which conflates anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. The JLM must not be allowed to continue to exercise pressure beyond its numerical size. Conference has shown clearly that the membership has no interest in appeasing those determined to destabilise Corbyn's leadership.

Today's issue: WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 27

- A first time delegate gives his impressions of this year's historic conference
- We have a unprecedented opportunity to transform the Labour Party
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Stuffed parrots, texts from Momentum - but very little real decision-making

A first-time delegate gives his impressions of conference

I really enjoyed my first time at conference. It was fantastic to see so many like-minded people, quite a few of whom were very happy to describe themselves openly as Marxists. I did not expect the mood to be so overwhelmingly pro-left, so clearly behind Corbyn and so visibly pro-Palestinian. It's evident that the panic in the right-wing press over the anti-Semitism scandal helped to consolidate the left at conference. Of course, delegates were eating out of John McDonnell's and Jeremy Corbyn's hands. But I did not expect everybody around me to get up to whoop and cheer when Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi made her pro-Palestinian speech. I could not see anybody staying in their seat. Another speaker got a standing ovation for mentioning that she was a member of Momentum.

I also did not expect the right to be quite so small and useless. Apart from a small group of people handing out Labour First's *White Pages*, I hardly came across them and they were almost invisible at conference.

Having said all of that, I can't say I really understood what was going on most of the time. I don't think delegates were really in control of things here. Everything is left to the last moment, and because of the various NEC compromises it was difficult to prepare. You really have to study the daily update from the Conference Arrangements Committee (CAC). For example, it was only by chance that I saw the proposed change to the National Policy Forum's document on Israel/Palestine in Sunday's report.

This year's conference agenda was designed, so we were told, to maximise the number of contributions from the conference floor, as opposed to just the party big-wigs. But the method of selecting these ordinary delegates was hard to believe. Speakers were selected by the chair in groups of three, from different parts of the floor. However, up to fifty would-be speakers attempting to catch the eye of the chair led to the employment of ever more bizarre theatrics: comrades were seen holding up hats, scarves, stuffed parrots, inflated bananas, open umbrellas... you get the picture. Those just raising their hand stood no chance.

But it was worse than that – in one session the chair admitted that they could only see the delegates in the front section of the audience, so anyone wanting to speak from the raised section at the rear would have a long wait. Delegates around me noticed that often the randomly se-

lected speakers seemed to be very well informed with speeches that must have taken a while to prepare. Perhaps it was not that random after all.

This chaotic method of speaker selection was matched by the incoherent structure of the sessions. In no way could they be called debates – there was no order to the contributions and many topics in the NPF documents (to which Tony Blair outsourced policy-making) were not covered at all.

It was not much better when it came to contemporary motions. We only got to see them in the CAC's report on Sunday morning: a thick booklet with over 120 motions, which were grouped into different 'themes'. And by 3.30pm we were

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supposed to have read them all and then decide in the 'priorities ballot' which four themes we would like to see debated at conference. That is impossible of course. And of course it is designed to be impossible.

This is where the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy comes in. They certainly worked through the conference agenda (and dragged Momentum along with them – they are linked, of course. As I understand it, Momentum's owner Jon Lansman used to be a leading light in the CLPD back in the day).

As CLPD's Pete Willsman has been sitting on the NEC for decades, he gets prior access to material and so his comrades were able to read through all the motions in advance. They used their fringe meeting on Saturday evening to instruct/suggest to delegates which themes to vote on. They already knew that the unions would go for growth and investment, public sector pay, workers' rights and Grenfell. So, in order to maximise the motions heard, delegates were urged to vote for social care, NHS, housing and railways. Lo and behold, these themes got the vast majority of CLPs' votes.

As a normal delegate, I felt pretty much out of the loop most of the time, so this attempt to coordinate and explain issues was most welcome. At their fringe meeting on Tuesday night, CLPD comrades also urged CLP delegates to remit *all* their rule changes in order to get the 'Corbyn review' through unopposed. I must say

I had my doubts about that tactic, as my own CLP was one of those who voted through the 'McDonnell amendment': we wanted to see a dramatic reduction to 5 per cent of the nominations needed from MPs and MEPs in order to get a leadership candidate on to the ballot paper. In the end, we were one of the many CLPs who "regretfully" remitted their rule change.

Momentum was a bit short on the arguments, but better with technology. They were texting us throughout the conference, giving voting advice. Particularly the session on Monday afternoon has to be regarded as a brilliant example of Momentum's ability to issue voting instructions to delegates at very short notice. The very last speaker in the session moved a reference back of a couple of paragraphs in the NPF document on 'Work, Pensions and Equality'. As he was literally the last speaker, there was no time to hear other speakers for or against, so delegates really had no idea which way to vote.

But the Momentum organisers must have decided it was an important issue, because text messages were despatched to all their supporting delegates on the conference floor: "Please vote for the reference back to reverse cuts to social security!" The document only criticised the cuts, but the delegate wanted the Labour Party to commit itself to reversing them. By the time the vote was taken a few minutes later, the message had got through. The reference back was carried, with support from a huge majority of CLP delegates. The NPF will now have to look at it again – though of course ordinary members will have to wait to see if the 200 or so members of the NPF will actually enforce this in their next annual report.

This kind of decision-making is very much hit and miss. There were plenty of other issues in the very vacuous NPF reports that deserved to be referenced back, but I presume nobody was called in to make the point! In the end, I ended up abstaining on all of the documents, because they are really full of waffle, without any clear, coherent policy proposals. Ditto the composited contemporary motions. As has been common practice, they have been merged into the most bland and uncontroversial motherhood and apple pie-type statements. Impossible to vote against.

The atmosphere of conference was joyous, even jubilant. It's just a shame that we haven't got a hold on conference and the party bureaucracy yet. Conference really hammered home to me the need to change that!