

UK: Labour?s Two Brexit Faces

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Jeremy Corbyn's latest statement on Labour's Brexit policy, in an email to party members, has been presented as a major shift towards a "Remain" position. It is not. It is essentially a re-statement of what has been the policy since the Liverpool conference; "constructive ambiguity" or, in plain terms, a fudge. At most, there is a greater emphasis on calling for a Remain vote in any referendum held on the existing deal, perhaps tweaked by a new Tory prime minister, or any proposal to Leave without a deal.

Corbyn?s message is essentially "scenario one" in what the Trade Union Liaison Organisation, TULO, a meeting of the leaders of the party-affiliated unions, had agreed the day before. Hailed as making Labour a Remain party, it is in reality meaningless, since there is not going to be any such referendum before October 31. The only possible reason for re-stating it is to fool the majority of party members, who favour Remain in all circumstances, into continuing to give uncritical loyalty to the existing leadership. The hope is that Labour can, for the time being, masquerade as the Remain Party that it is realistic to vote for, as opposed to the Liberals and the Greens.

TULO, however, also adopted a "scenario two", which is what they expect Labour's policy to be in the event of a snap general election, which many commentators believe is not only possible but even probable. This is the complete opposite of scenario one. Labour would continue to "respect" the 2016 referendum result and seek to negotiate its own Brexit deal with Brussels. It would then put whatever deal could be agreed to a referendum. Whether it would advocate Leave or Remain in that referendum would depend on the terms agreed with Brussels. It would be bizarre if it negotiated a "good" deal and then told the electorate to vote against it.

The key point in this scenario is that in such a general election Labour would effectively campaign as a Leave party. Corbyn did not explicitly endorse this part of the union leaders' proposals because he is well aware that the majority of members would oppose it, always supposing, that is, there were any forum in which they could voice their opinion!

This farcically self-contradictory position of two scenarios will only hold until and unless the new Tory prime minister, presumably Boris Johnson, is forced to call a general election. Then the moment of truth will come for Corbyn supporting members who overwhelmingly oppose Brexit with its ending of free movement for European workers and students.

The European elections already showed that Labour is losing thousands upon thousands of voters to the Lib Dems and the Greens, having already lost virtually all its Scottish support to the SNP, because those parties are clearly opposed to Brexit in any shape or form. If the party were to campaign in a general election on a pro-Leave platform, it is all but guaranteed that it would not just be voters deserting it but large numbers of members, too. Opinion polls already show it falling short of a majority by some 100 seats, the idea that it could seriously expect to negotiate a radically different deal with the EU, is a fantasy.

What has become clearer than ever this week, is that the leadership team, the shadow cabinet and the general secretaries, whatever side they are on, do agree on one thing; the memberships of the party and the unions must not be allowed to have their say. Standing conference ovations and unanimous resolutions, that's our job. Who said that it was only Stalinism that engaged in such mockeries of democracy?

As we have said time and again, Red Flag believes any form of Brexit would be a reactionary, nationalist policy that would inevitably strengthen the most right wing forces in Britain, as it already has. Any Brexit would obstruct solidarity with, and from, our class sisters and brothers across the Channel, and worsen the conditions of European workers in Britain who perform invaluable jobs here, for example, in the NHS, education and construction.

The "alternative" to Europe would not be any increase in sovereignty but submission to the most reactionary American President of modern times; a racist, a misogynist, a climate change denier, a privatiser. A president, moreover, who thinks he can decide not only who Britain's ambassador in Washington should be but who should be in Number Ten. In Boris Johnson he thinks he has found both a disciple and a lackey.

Labour should concentrate on launching a struggle to stop Boris Johnson and his Brexit, whatever form this takes, including direct action on the streets and in the workplaces. If this forces a general election, well and good. Labour's manifesto must not contain a commitment to renegotiating Brexit but an unequivocal pledge to Remain. It should be totally opposed to Trump on climate change, trade wars and military provocations. At the same time it should commit the party to launching a fight against the neoliberal, pro-austerity rulers of the EU.

At home, it should propose a radical programme for rebuilding our social services, fully restoring union rights and ensuring the social reconstruction of the left behind areas in the UK. Such a manifesto would arouse the same enthusiasm, and more, that we saw in 2017. It would enable Labour to see off the Liberal Democrats and the Greens who, as the unambiguous and consistent anti-Brexit parties, could otherwise easily deny Labour a majority.

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