

Britain: Labour's manifesto shows it is the true party of workers' rights

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It cannot be an accident that Jeremy Corbyn launched what may be his one and only general election manifesto in the city of Bradford. One of the forerunners of today's Corbyn-led Labour Party was the Independent Labour Party (ILP) [1]. It was a full-blooded left wing party, founded in 1893 in Bradford. And, Keir Hardie, the ILP's first leader and founder of the Labour Party, has frequently been cited by Corbyn as one of his inspirations [2].

Both Hardie and the ILP were very strong advocates of workers' rights, having emerged from the then nascent union movement. Corbyn, a former full-time officer of one of the forerunner's of the biggest union in Britain, UNISON [3], is equally a very strong advocate of workers' rights. This shows up in the publication today of Labour's general election manifesto.

With the Conservatives trying to muscle in on traditional Labour territory by painting themselves as the party of workers [4], it's worth taking a closer look to see which party truly represents workers.

Among the most significant of the pledges in the manifesto on rights at work [5] are:

- All workers equal rights from day one, whether part-time or full-time
- Banning zero hours contracts so that every worker gets a guaranteed number of hours each week
- Ending the use of overseas labour to undercut domestic wages and conditions
- Repealing the Trade Union Act 2016 and rolling out collective bargaining by sector
- Guaranteeing unions a right to access workplaces to represent members
- Raising the minimum wage to the level of the living wage
- Ending the public sector pay cap
- Instituting a maximum pay ratio of 20:1 in the public sector and companies bidding for public contracts
- Banning unpaid internships
- Abolishing employment tribunal fees

- Giving self-employed workers the status of workers
- Setting up a commission to modernise the law around employment status
- Creating a Ministry of Labour with the resources to enforce workers' rights

These pledges are essentially a replication of *A Manifesto for Labour Law* by the Institute of Employment Rights in June 2016 [6], devised in conjunction with labour law academics to promote healthy policy for workers.

Labour's worker problem

The socialist left has often argued that Labour has failed to inspire the loyalty of workers, and union members especially, by being insufficiently radical [7]. Consequently, the argument goes, there was less than a compelling reason to vote for Labour. Along with pledges to bring the water industry, railways, Royal Mail and some energy companies back into public ownership (which should reduce pressure on workers' wages and conditions), this cannot be said to be the case this time round.

Some have criticised Corbyn's Labour for giving into the allegedly vested and backward interest of unions. As Martin Kettle of the *Guardian* argued [8], "union power is not the same as workers' rights".

At one level, this is a valid point. With only around a quarter of workers now holding union membership [9], workers cannot rely on unions any time soon to be able to effectively defend their rights and interests.

But when one recognises that the implementation of workers' rights has always needed the help of unions [10] because they are the only sizeable independent organisations with the resources to do so, this point loses its force. Unions inform workers of their rights and help them apply them. Plus, unions have always helped more than just their members because employers apply the gains of union negotiated deals to all employees.

Wider significance

But focusing on the union aspect blinds critics to the actual significance of Labour's manifesto. This is that, compared to what the Tories are proposing, Labour prioritises collective rights over individual rights so that workers can act together to advance their interests. Labour's manifesto recognises that the workers are stronger together, echoing a fundamental belief of Karl Marx that the condition of the freedom of the individual is the condition of the freedom of all [11].

Indeed, without collective rights in law, especially with regard to the right to strike, any collective bargaining can easily end up being merely collective begging [12].

The most obvious case in point concerns the right to sectoral collective bargaining, which Labour has emphasised in its manifesto. In Britain, companies in the same sector compete primarily against each other on the basis of their labour costs. Hence, there is a competitive advantage to cut wages and conditions as the principle route to profitability.

But by providing a statutory basis to sectoral collective bargaining, all companies in a sector would be compelled to furnish workers with the same minimum terms and conditions. No longer would

they compete on labour costs in a “race to the bottom”. And, their attention would turn to improving productivity through investment in technology and training.

With stronger collective rights, applied and enforced with the help of unions, both unions and workers’ rights would be immeasurably strengthened. Time will shortly tell whether Labour’s manifesto will help it regain the support of working class voters. Or whether Theresa May’s pitch to be the workers’ friend will gain sufficient traction.

If Corbyn is successful, it will be a fitting tribute to the heritage of Bradford. It was here that an almighty 19-week strike at the city’s Manningham Mills textile factory by some 5,000 workers over wage cuts in 1891 gave a big spur to the founding of the ILP [13]. It will also have been fitting that Labour launched the manifesto at the University of Bradford given that it started out life in 1832 as the Bradford Mechanics Institute [14], an organisation designed to help working class people gain the necessary skills for the ever changing world of work.

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P.S.

* The Conversation. 16 mai 2017, 13:39 CEST:

<https://theconversation.com/labours-manifesto-shows-it-is-the-true-party-of-workers-rights-77801>

* Gregor Gall is editor of the Scottish Left Review magazine and director of the Jimmy Reid Foundation.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.independentlabour.org.uk/main/2011/11/03/ilp-history-beginnings-in-bradford/>

[2] <http://jeremycorbyn.org.uk/articles/jeremy-corbyn-keir-hardie-memorial-lecture/>

[3] <https://www.unison.org.uk>

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/may/15/are-tories-workers-party-labour-polling-figures-suggest-they-are>

[5] <http://www.labour.org.uk/index.php/manifesto2017/fair-deal-at-work>

[6] https://issuu.com/instituteofemploymentrights/docs/preview_a_manifesto_for_labour_law

[7] <https://socialistworker.co.uk/art/40491/Labours+betrayals+let+Tories+back+in>

[8] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/11/labour-manifesto-ideas-right-state-role>

[9] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/525938/Trade_

[Union_Membership_2015_-_Statistical_Bulletin.pdf](#)

[10] https://books.google.es/books/about/Union_Organizing.html?id=R8E2E-NxvfcC&redir_esc=y

[11] <https://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2004/Kim.pdf>

[12] <http://www.tradeunionfreedom.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Kill-the-Bill-Final.pdf>

[13] <http://www.socialistparty.org.uk/articles/11928>

[14] <http://www.bradford.ac.uk/news/university-in-profile/history-and-the-university/>