

UK: No excuses: defend free movement

Thursday 12 December 2019, by [GILLARD Pete](#) (Date first published: 7 October 2019).

Policy passed at 2019 Labour Party conference creates an opening for all on the left to argue for open borders, even as the leadership seeks to undermine it, writes Pete Gillard.

In September 2019, Labour Party Conference passed, almost unanimously, an unprecedented policy in defence of migrants initiated by the Labour Campaign for Free Movement.

The motion began with a statement of principle: *'Free movement, equality and rights for migrants, are socialist values and benefit us all.'*

It continued with a set of demands that sought to implement those principles: extension of free movement from simply within the EU to a global policy; ending the hostile environment with the closing of detention centres, allowing access to public funds and housing, ending migrant charges in the NHS; a reversal of the current Shadow Cabinet policy by stating any immigration controls should not be based on the needs of business, income of migrants, or caps on numbers; and, importantly, stating that migrants should have exactly the same rights as British citizens including voting rights.

This motion, [Composite 20](#), was backed up with similarly unopposed motions from the Women's Conference, defending migrant women and calling for the end of their detention, and an NHS composite calling again for the abolition of migrant charging.

The Labour leadership did not oppose the motions at Conference. The motions were supported by the NEC. But that did not prevent Diane Abbott, who had been one of the best defenders of migrants in the Shadow Cabinet, going on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme the following morning to state that Labour's policy had not changed. Abbott said: 'But in terms of who comes in, one of the things that we are suggesting is a new system of work visas, which would be looking at what the needs of the country are...' Her excuse for this rejection of an almost unanimous Conference policy was: 'There are a lot of differences about immigration policy.'

Abbott was doing little more than repeating what Jeremy Corbyn said in a speech in Peterborough in 2017:

Labour is not wedded to freedom of movement for EU citizens as a point of principle, but I don't want that to be misinterpreted, nor do we rule it out [...]

We cannot afford to lose full access to the European markets on which so many British businesses and jobs depend [...]

Changes to the way migration rules operate from the EU will be part of the negotiations.

The difference is stark. The Conference motion started from a principle that all migrants had equal rights with people who were born in Britain. Your rights should not be dependent on which bit of dirt you were born on. The Labour leadership, while personally not hostile to migrants, see them as a

bargaining chip in trade negotiations.

The 'chauvinist tradition'

Corbyn was elected as Labour leader with the promise that the membership would decide policy. It now seems this will not always be applied. But why has Corbyn retreated?

The answer probably lies in fear of the electorate – fear that 'unpopular' policies will not go down well on the doorstep and people will not vote Labour. The official Vote Leave campaign, run by Dominic Cummings, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson, put hostility to migration at the heart of its message. Corbyn does not want to take a hard and principled stand on the question for fear of alienating Leave voters.

This fear has a long history in the Labour Party. Richard Crossman, a 'left' intellectual in Harold Wilson's Cabinet in the 1960s recounts in his diary how Labour's immigration policy was developed then:

[The Cabinet Committee] has been gradually dragged out of [its] purely liberalistic attitude to a recognition that we have to combine tight immigration controls ... with a policy for integrating into the community the immigrants that are there already... Ever since the [Smethwick](#) election it has been quite clear that immigration can be the greatest potential vote-loser if we are seen to be permitting a flood of immigrants to come in and blight the central areas in all our cities.

Corbyn certainly wouldn't share Crossman's description of immigrants as blighting cities, but the electoral fear remains.

It becomes justified by the Labour leadership as part of planning for a different society. Corbyn has argued that by tightening up controls on employers, the 'need' for migrants would fall. He does not put at the centre of his argument the needs of migrants – people attempting to escape the ravages of global capitalism and climate change.

Paul Foot, the socialist journalist, put it well in an [article](#) written about the Harold Wilson government:

The chauvinist tradition in the British Left is today its greatest enemy. It is this tradition which drives 'extreme' Left-wingers in Parliament and outside to talk of immigration control as 'planning' and something which should therefore be welcomed.

The chauvinism is little changed. The theme of '[British Jobs for British Workers](#)' is alive and well amongst the trade union leaderships even if they are sometimes reticent to use the phrase directly.

An opportunity for all of us

But just because the Labour leadership are ignoring Composite 20 does not mean those of us on the left who defend migrant rights should similarly dismiss it as yet another failed attempt to change Labour Party policy. The Composite was not perfect. It seemed to accept some level of immigration controls even though the basis on which they could be instituted was unclear. It was not specifically for 'open borders', but by calling for extending free movement and equal rights for migrants it provides a tremendous antidote to the chauvinism in our movement.

There was real anger when this policy was immediately downplayed by the Labour leadership. Using quirks of a LP Rule Book created by the right in the past to allow them to ignore Conference

decisions, the current Labour leadership are playing a similar game.

Over 1,000 Labour Party members, organised by the Labour Campaign for Free Movement, immediately signed an [open letter](#) to the Labour leadership calling on the party to 'respect the conference vote on free movement' and saying: 'if conference is to be sovereign, there cannot be any picking and choosing which motions are adopted and which democratic decisions cast aside'.

Unfortunately, the letter is likely to be ignored. A Labour leadership wedded to social democratic electoral politics where policies have to be fitted to what people are believed to support, not what should be supported, does not see its primary job as going out attempting to change people's ideas.

It is quite probable that there would be less hostility to the content of Composite 20 than the Labour leadership fear. Certainly, campaigns against migrant charges in the NHS have won broad support. Opinion polls have shown immigration to be a declining issue of importance for people.

Composite 20 presents us with a great opportunity to test this out. Any Labour Party member can go out canvassing with a consistent Labour Party policy on immigration and discuss it on the doorstep. Fears can be alleviated and blame for bad housing, cuts in services and inadequate healthcare can be placed squarely where the responsibility lies – capitalism and its most ardent supporter, the Tory Party. Making any concessions that immigration might be a problem lets the real enemies off the hook.

It does not need to be just activity for individual LP members. CLPs can produce leaflets explaining the policy, hold public meetings in communities, and in general promote the policy.

But this is not just an opportunity for the Labour Party. The trade union leaderships who allowed the motion through Labour Party Conference would, in many cases, be horrified if such a motion was raised in their own unions. Union activists can promote the policies in their workplaces and union bodies with the authority of a Labour Party Conference behind them. Trades Councils can call public meetings and organise for explanatory leaflets to be distributed in every workplace. Campaigns against the effects of austerity can ensure that the effects on migrants and defence of their rights are central.

Migrant rights are not just another, and possibly less important, issue. They go to the heart of what the fight for a socialist society is all about. Paul Foot [again](#):

Immigration control is chauvinist legislation. It cannot be contemplated by an international socialist, for its whole rationale is founded on the nation state and the feverish competition in which that nation state is engaged. This struggle between nation states ... splits and divides workers from their main objectives, and, in the long run, weakens their strength all over the world.

Composite 20 can provide an opening for all on the left to ensure that the arguments for open borders gain a much wider audience in the working class if we take the opportunity.

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