

2019 election defeat in Britain: what happened and what next?

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A shattering defeat...

The election of 2019 has given Boris Johnson the majority he craved. His campaign was fought on the most fundamentally dishonest basis: that he could provide a Brexit that would regenerate run-down post-industrial communities and restore Britain to its mythical place in the sun. In reality, this new government will smash or sell off the remnants of the welfare state, destroy all remaining rights and protections, and further reduce the living conditions of those hardest hit by years of neo-liberalism to those currently experienced by the US underclass. In the process, social conservatism will increase, accompanied by violence and intolerance, feeding the far right and its most extreme elements.

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Labour fought to win, on a programme that would have brought about a sea change in British social, economic and political life. But the valiant efforts of tens of thousands of Labour Party activists, who worked tirelessly to try and defeat the Tories, were unable to turn back the tsunami of lies and disinformation that the establishment and its allies, in the press and media, wove through the entire campaign. There were two key messages that the Tories stuck to and which enabled their victory: Get Brexit Done and the vilification of Corbyn as a traitor and an anti-semite. The Labour Party's compromise position on Brexit did not win back Leave voters and lost the party support from some who'd voted to remain. More than 80% of the Tory vote intersected with the Leave vote. In the final days of the campaign the Tories ramped up the racist rhetoric around migration and Brexit with Johnson saying 'EU migrants have been able to treat the UK as if it's part of their own country for too long'. Nobody should doubt that a vote for the Tories was a vote for bigotry, xenophobia and racism.

This is a new political situation. It was no ordinary defeat but one which marks the entry of the far right into mainstream British political life via the Tory Party. The Brexit Party was smashed by the Cummings strategy and gained no seats but Farage will no doubt still have his political reward for standing aside in Tory-held seats. This new government is already far to the right of any previous Tory administration. There will be new draconian legislation on sentencing, on migration and new restrictions on trades union rights and attacks on the independence of the judiciary. There will be changes to the voting system with the introduction of photo ID. The more liberal sections of the media are already under attack - Channel 4 News have had their license to broadcast threatened. The NHS will be opened up to US pharma companies and further privatisation. A 'no deal' Brexit is now on the cards with all the economic chaos that would entail. This is a victory for the most reactionary forces in British society.

We must now prepare for a long period of bitter defensive struggles. The analysis of this defeat must focus not just on the proximate causes but also its deeper roots. The neo-liberal onslaught of the last 40 years, privatising and deindustrialising, destroyed working class communities, many of which turned away from Labour to enable Johnson's victory. These old industrial areas suffered not just from Thatcher's policies but were also left to rot under New Labour. Poverty and social decay had provided an ideal breeding ground for far right ideas, uncontested by a Labour Party which had itself embraced neo-liberalism. Corbyn's policies correctly identified and sought to address these long standing problems with strategies of investment and economic regeneration but confidence in Labour had been long destroyed.

This breaking of the relationship of trust between Labour and sections of the working class took place incrementally over many years. Labour abandoned its traditional role as tribune of the working class, from the late 1980s onwards, and parties of the far right moved to fill that space in former industrial areas which often were treated by Labour merely as reliable voting fodder, safe seats for party front-benchers. In general elections from 1997 to 2010, throughout the New Labour period, the British National Party (BNP) vote rose from 35,000 to over 560,000 and many of the largest votes were in these areas. As the BNP went into decline the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) emerged and it built on those votes. And just as the BNP vote morphed into a much larger UKIP vote in those areas, so this laid the ground for the turn to the Tories in this election. Paul Mason wrote about Leigh, the old mining seat where he was born, 'Voting Ukip turned out to be a gateway drug to voting Conservative'.

The defeat mirrors Trump's 2016 victory in the rust-belt states in the US; Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa, and Marine Le Pen's rise in the former industrial areas of northern France. Johnson's victory is based on the further erosion of Labour's vote in its traditional heartlands; up until the election most of these new Tory seats had been Labour's for generations. He achieved this through convincing enough former Labour voters in the Midlands and the North that the 'Get Brexit Done' slogan stands for them. Indeed it has come to represent many things to many people and often little to do with EU membership: giving the elite a kicking, keeping out foreigners, taking back control of their own lives and making Britain great again. Johnson's brand of English nationalism has subverted the pride in community that existed formerly though the collective strength and dignity of the organised working class and steered it towards xenophobia and intolerance devoid of class consciousness and solidarity. But however voters have interpreted Johnson's promises, he will deliver nothing for these communities.

The trade union and labour movement is deeply conscious of the social deprivation in these areas and many had identified the real problems that Labour would have in sustaining its vote. But the very different prescriptions on offer were insufficient to stem the tide. When dissatisfaction with Labour was far more deep-rooted than simply appearing to be a Remain party, and the Leave vote had come to represent a much more complex set of factors than simply leaving the EU, Labour's last minute attempts to nuance its approach to a second referendum, or to send out more Leave shadow cabinet members to canvass in working-class Leave constituencies, were hardly going to touch the problem.

For the last 40 years the trade union movement has been substantially weakened by the neoliberal offensive. The anti-trades union laws that Thatcher introduced in order to curtail trade union power were never challenged in the New Labour years. There were many bitter battles starting with the steelworkers' strike in 1980 in which major sections of the working class came into struggle but all were left isolated and all went down to eventual defeat. The most important and decisive was the great miners' strike of 1984/5. This was a heroic struggle by the most important section of the working class and it contained the possibility of defeating Thatcher and changing the course of recent history. The miners were betrayed by the leadership of both the Labour Party and the Trades

Union Congress and we are still living with the outcome of that betrayal.

The UK now has the most restrictive anti-trade union legislation in Europe. This October members of the Communication Workers' Union (CWU) voted for strike action. It was one of the biggest turnouts in a ballot for many years and 97.1 per cent backed a strike. However the employers went to court and got an injunction to prevent the action on a small technical point. There was little response to this from the broader trade union movement. All hope rested with a new Labour government which would repeal the anti-trade union laws.

Trades union membership has been seriously eroded, halving since 1979. Four million workers are already either on zero-hours contracts or casual contracts with 'hours to be notified' or suffering from intermittent employment or underemployment. This section of the working class - the 'precarariat' - is not unionised and will expand under this new Tory regime.

We have reached the point where it is almost impossible for strikes to take place or to be effective. The Johnson government will introduce more laws to curb the unions and Brexit will see workers' rights further undermined. The Tories want a cheap labour force unprotected by trade unions or employment rights. The post-Brexit economic model that the Tories are proposing is that of the authoritarian city-state Singapore with low corporation tax, low wages, weak trade unions, and few welfare provisions. Migrant labour will still be employed in the agricultural and other sectors but these will be guest workers with no rights at all and therefore prey to the worst employers. However, the Tories' plan for a deregulated casualised economy won't overcome the relative decline of British capitalism.

The anti-semitism campaign

The Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn is enormously popular amongst Labour's activists and amongst young people generally but there was a considerable antipathy to him in those areas where Labour lost heavily. Much of this was manufactured by the media, the establishment and by his opponents within his own party. It is to Jeremy's enormous credit that he emerges from this campaign with great honour having withstood the most sustained personal vilification of any politician of modern times.

The political assassination of the Labour leader has been the central preoccupation of both the establishment and the right-wing within the Labour Party since he won the leadership in 2015. Former members of the security services have presented him as a threat to national security. He has been maligned as unpatriotic, a supporter of terrorism, a Stalinist, and an anti-semite. He has faced every possible smear, but the most effective and the one most developed over the last four years has been the anti-semitism campaign.

Anti-semitism exists in British society and across all political and religious groupings. The 2017 Staetsky report, 'Anti-semitism in contemporary Great Britain', does not show higher levels of anti-semitism on the left than on the right. In fact the reverse is the case and there is no serious analysis showing that the Labour Party is institutionally anti-semitic and therefore there are no grounds for the malicious statements during the election, by the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis, that Jeremy Corbyn was unfit for high office because he has been 'complicit in prejudice' and allowed the 'poison of anti-semitism to take root in the party'.

This hostile campaign has been deeply damaging. It has been a manufactured and fraudulent, almost evidence-free, offensive. Central to this campaign has been the attempt to re-define anti-semitism to include opposition to the policies of Israel, and to curb criticism of these policies, particularly in

relation to the suppression of the Palestinian people. This campaign to de-legitimise criticism of Israel's treatment of the Palestinians is international. Thus two new members of the United States Congress Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, were denied visas to visit Israel because of their support for the pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

The Labour Party has been unable to counter this campaign, despite having adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of anti-semitism in full and making speeding up and strengthening of its disciplinary procedures a top priority. The truth is that this is a campaign little concerned with racism; its central aim is to destroy the Corbyn leadership. It has sought to redefine anti-semitism and politically weaponise it against the left. Comrades from Jewish Voice for Labour have worked tirelessly to counter this campaign but it also needed support from the leadership which has not been forthcoming.

Socialist internationalism

Following this defeat Jeremy Corbyn will resign and the right wing will seek to blame him personally for this defeat. However the argument that Labour would have won under a different leader is wrong. The campaign against Corbyn has been vicious and any Labour leader proposing the changes that Corbyn did would have faced a similar onslaught. A new leader will not in itself resolve the political crisis Labour now faces. It would be a mistake and a misunderstanding of the political landscape and the source of this defeat to believe so.

In the election the Labour Party tried to face both ways on Brexit. This was not a credible policy; it was unsustainable and it lost more votes than it gained. The Tories' 'Get Brexit Done' slogan dominated the campaign and left little room for the Labour manifesto to make the kind of impact it had in 2017.

Brexit has been the vehicle for the far right's ascendancy. The hard right has taken over the Tory Party, driving out 'one nation Tories', transforming the Tory Party into a new UKIP. Brexit facilitates a reactionary anti-migrant nationalism and must be fought from an internationalist socialist perspective. Solidarity with migrants from inside and outside the EU and opposition to the proposed Tory migration laws is an essential part of our campaigning work and will become even more so.

Brexit is the attempt to resolve the deepening contradictions of post-war British capitalism through economic nationalism. However it is presented by sections of the pro-Brexit left, it is a false solution. In the era of world economy and world politics it is not possible for the problems of war, poverty, unemployment, racism and environmental destruction to be dealt with at the level of the nation state. The nature of the system we face demands an internationalist strategy.

The present conditions of capitalist reproduction cannot be made eternal. The globalisation of capital deepens the growing rivalries between states. The contradictions within the world economy have been sharpened by the policy prescriptions taken to resolve the 2008 crisis. The US/China trade war has already led to a decline in world trade and Trump threatens to open new fronts at every turn. French luxury goods will be subject to 100% tariffs if Macron implements a digital services tax aimed at Google and Amazon. Thus the re-assertion of economic protectionism and nationalism echoes that of the 1930s which saw the preparations for a world war. US power has been ebbing since the 1960s and the immediate crisis revolves around the challenge from China to US dominance over world economics and politics.

The financial deregulation of the 1980s makes it now impossible for any state, and this includes the USA, to carry out an independent economic policy. It is not possible therefore for any government of

the left to establish socialism within national boundaries. The labour movement must make central the question of internationalism and its opposition to Brexit located within that understanding. The lesson from Syriza in Greece - and this election - is that the left must propose policies within the framework of systemic change.

The world is more globalised, more integrated and joined up than ever before. There is no going back. There are no national solutions to our economic and social problems. Whether it is the environmental crisis or the disastrous economic system, we must work across national borders.

What Next?

This new Johnson government will be vicious but it has no underlying policy narrative and no solution to the problems facing British capitalism beyond subservience to US capital. The political crisis that the Brexit vote unleashed is not resolved. Scotland has swung significantly towards the SNP and there will be pressure for a second independence referendum.

Only a genuine democratic mass movement can defeat this government and that must be organised both in parliament and on the streets. There must be the widest and most open discussion throughout the labour movement about our strategy going forward.

There may now be some demoralisation among activists but there will also be anger. That anger will be the base on which working class struggle is rebuilt. Those of us who hold to an internationalist, anti-capitalist, pro-migrant perspective must unite our forces and find those forms of organisation that will enable us to forge a path that takes that offensive to this government.

The mass movement that propelled Jeremy to the leadership still has enormous potential. There is a deep desire particularly among young people for social change. Momentum which was set up to support Jeremy's leadership has a membership of many tens of thousands and is an effective organisation for campaigning within the Labour Party and for electoral work. The World Transformed has developed an impressive range of political education. Many young activists are working within these structures - this is necessary work, but the centralised nature of these organisations can stifle the dynamism that is essential in building inclusive mass movements.

The concentration on political struggle has been focused within the Labour Party itself sometimes to the detriment of wider struggles and crucial social and political movements. This was partly explicable by a defensive focus when Jeremy faced almost constant attack from the right-wing in the party and repeated attempts to undermine his leadership. No doubt there will be further battles within the Labour Party and this defeat will strengthen the right-wing but it must also mark a turning point for us on the left. We require a new strategy to defeat this Johnson/Trump government. Let us unite our forces and bring together those activists both within and outside the Labour Party who share a common political understanding, recognising the shift to the far right that has taken place.

A central part of the work we now face is the rebuilding of the fighting capacity of our trades unions. The older larger unions could take some lessons from the small new unions that have emerged over the last few years. Organising amongst migrant and very low-paid casualised workers, unions such as the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain have had some very successful strike actions, for example, with groups of outsourced workers at the London School of Economics and with Uber drivers and others.

We cannot wait for the next election in order to challenge the anti-trade union laws. The entire

movement will have to face the necessity of more generalised strike and solidarity actions. This will be essential if we are to defend workers' rights, mount a defence of the NHS or to push for the action necessary to stop climate change. Let us link together the campaigns which already exist.

Johnson's victory will empower every racist and fascist in the land and therefore anti-racist and anti-fascist work must be central to our activity. We are proposing to the European Left Party a second No Pasaran European-wide conference in 2020 bringing together all those opposing racism and fascism.

At the heart of our work now must be the building of concrete links across borders bringing together campaigns to defend migrants, to resist the rise of the far right, to fight climate change and to co-ordinate action against capitalism. The French general strike and events in Latin America and the Middle East show the scale of working class resistance and the determination to build an alternative.

A radical alternative that challenges the system of capital itself and unites social, industrial and political struggles is necessary.

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P.S.

- Public Reading Rooms:

<https://prruk.org/the-election-defeat-what-happened-and-what-do-we-do-next/>