

Britain: Labour Party conference, sir Keir rampant

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Dave Kellaway reports on the Labour Party conference in Liverpool.

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Today, Sir Keir is the Lord of all he surveys, the coming master of the 'political wing of the British people', ready to save the nation from the evil elitist Truss government and save us all from ecological disaster. His faithful followers have been model subjects, singing their loyalty to his Liege Lord, Charles III, alongside him on the Union Jack-decorated stage. No one heckled his speech like last year. More Corbynistas had been eliminated from the party, including accredited delegate and recently elected NEC member and Jewish Voice for Labour leader, Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi, so he indeed had a quieter time.

Elected by constituency members to the National Executive Naomi has been suspended because she spoke at a meeting organised by a group that was subsequently banned by Labour. It would appear that you need to have foresight into the future to know that speaking at a gathering organised by some group or other could be outlawed and render your party membership null and void. It also appears that the Labour leadership has set parameters under which free speech and democratic debate are possible. Apparently, members are too stupid and not political enough to attend a meeting and discuss it with people who are not members of their party. Those who show up to a public meeting are now immediately labelled as members of the group under discussion. New proposals that Starmer has released this week have been met with approval by some on the soft left, who see it as evidence that socialists are driving policy. They are overlooking the fact that the leadership has continued its witchhunt. More importantly, these policies have been established independently from those on the left, using their own political strategy, which is not even a very left reformist one.

Starmer enjoyed a matey tête-à-tête with ex-Manchester United legend Gary Neville. Aside from attending the conference itself, he was also frequently spotted interacting with businesspeople and others. It seems he was too busy to join the striking dockers in Liverpool (they had to make do with a cardboard cut-out) and demonstrate support for those who are struggling to make ends meet. It seems the conference is getting shorter and shorter. I remember when it went through to Friday. People are drifting away nowadays after the leader's speech on Tuesday. The hall was only two-thirds full for Angela Rayner's closing remarks.

Dull to Prime Ministerial

The media's shift in tone toward Starmer, from dull to prime ministerial, is an indication of his growing confidence and status – which is mainly a result of the utter disarray of the latest brand of Tory government. Cutting corporation tax, letting the bankers' bonus flow like champagne again and giving up to £10,000 handouts to the top taxpayers has not proved popular, particularly in the Red Wall seats. The recent budget is threatening the financial security of many people who support the Conservative Party. Spending cuts seem to be the hidden agenda as public debt soars.

Rather than a Truss bounce, we are seeing her government appear dead on arrival. Many Tory MPs are already turning on her, and key sectors of the capitalist establishment are tearing their hair out. Oh, and the IMF, which normally imposes austerity programmes on developing countries, has just given her a ticking off for her unfair and disastrous budget. Today, Starmer cannot just rely on his opponents' double-faulting him to victory; they are not even on the court! Opinion polls have given Labour up to a 17-point lead and a working majority on its own.

Nationalisation?

Alongside the Tory debacle, the Labour leadership has been more effective, particularly over the energy crisis, where they have pushed for a windfall tax well before the government did a slimmed-down version. The bolder moves on nationalising rail – only when franchises expire – and bringing Royal Mail back under government ownership, as well as the creation of a publicly owned Great British Energy company, have helped boost Labour's polling numbers.

It is a clever move by the party leadership since it heads off to a degree the membership's support for taking all of the utilities back into common ownership. Linking to an ecological vision for 2030 also hit the right buttons. We can support it as a step forward, but in this company, it is presented as a rather nauseating nationalist crusade that will sit alongside the other privatising companies, competing with them. Leaving the existing utility companies to go on exploiting us and the environment for the profit of their shareholders. The advisor who came up with the "Great British" moniker for the leader must have thought they had created something on par with the "taking back control" slogan on Brexit.

The target of a greener, fossil fuel-free Britain by 2030 – albeit still including nuclear energy – is also popular among the wider public. Policies passed on child care and education are progressive and something the left can get behind.

A Government in Waiting

Unless there is some miracle that no one is currently predicting and there is a boom before 2024, there is now a strong probability that there will be a Starmer government at the next election. Politics has been so volatile recently that we cannot exclude events disrupting this scenario. The current wave of strikes could end with worker victory, which would further weaken Truss and reinforce the Labour vote. A defeat for the strikers or a deeper political crisis could work the other way, with Truss thinking she can do a Thatcher, smash the unions and win an election on that basis. She forgets that there was the Falklands war and other policy measures like the council house sell-off which crystallised her support. The situation is very different now.

Starmer might find this renewed radicalisation of the working class uncomfortable with his strategy of occupying the centre ground and showing the capitalists he can look after their interests. If there is a showdown, if he continues to sit on the fence, the effects could destabilise his grip on the party. Recent statements from some union leaders, however, show how far those agitating for industrial

struggle and the Labour Party have drifted apart. They take a “waiting for Keir” approach because they believe that electing a Labour government would solve all the issues that have led to the strikes. Some unions would rather back off from any high-stakes confrontation with the bosses on the basis that Starmer will be in Downing Street sooner or later.

“The Silenced Left”

Many Labour members will be very happy that there now appears to be clear red water between the two parties, and it would be childish for the left to not now acknowledge the shift in the political situation. In my view, there are two inappropriate reactions to the new policies:

- an ultra-left sectarian one, which ultimately takes an abstentionist position on a Labour government.
- an over-optimistic soft left, which suggests Starmer has been pushed by the left to take on socialist positions.

The first sectarian position tends to go along with a totally negative view of socialists working in Labour, saying we need a new party now and that the Labour Party is dead to the left. This ignores the real policy differences between a Labour and Tory government and their different impacts on the lives of working people. It also downplays the historic importance of trade union affiliation to the party and the fact that the bulk of working people with minimal class consciousness vote for Labour. Groups aligned with people like Chris Williamson are close to these positions.

The second, soft left position tends to be integrated with a belief that socialists should stay forever in Labour and that a real socialist government challenging the existing order can be achieved without a substantial split in the party. This may or may not include a reluctance to work with left-leaning groups outside the party and a consistent approach of keeping one’s head down and choosing your battles. Winning good policy battles at all levels and getting “good left” candidates adopted are big priorities. Momentum tends to take this approach:

We have seen this week that socialist policies are mainstream in the party and among the public, from inflation-busting pay rises to public ownership of key industries, the motions passed this week and the leadership’s announcements on rail nationalisation and the new public energy company are a testament to the left’s work in recent year’s campaigning for transformative policies and to the strength of our ideas

(MOMENTUM EMAIL THIS WEEK)

Ironically, the leadership were able to use all their tricks to prevent Momentum-supporting delegates from attending a composition meeting. This resulted in crucial left motions on public ownership of the utilities not being taken to the floor. The reality of political power inside the party over the magical power of socialist ideas is nakedly seen. The Great (Momentum chops the nationalist label out in their text) British Public energy company is entirely a creation of the leadership team and is counterposed to the Momentum line of bringing all utilities into common ownership. Trying to imagine, like some political form of transubstantiation, that the new wheeze was all down to socialists’ working away is to totally misread it.

Obviously, this does not mean we have to then go over to the ultra-left sectarian approach and merely condemn the new policy. You need a serious, balanced analysis.

The leadership stopped local parties from choosing their own candidates and defeated the motion that would have allowed Jeremy Corbyn to stand again in Islington. Also, it limited the maximum number of delegates CLPs could send to a future conference – targeting large left-wing CLPs like Hackney which has thousands of members and consequently more delegates. These motions and the witchhunt that excluded Naomi as an NEC member actually trump victories on motions. So Starmer has already said he will ignore the good conference motion passed on Proportional Representation and he can ditch any other progressive motions or water them down for the manifesto.

What was dangerous about Corbyn was not that the left had passed a pile of good motions, but that it managed to control some of the machinery. At the moment, the leadership is working hard to prevent any anti-Starmer candidates from being selected and even making it hard for existing ex-Corbyn MPs to be reselected in trigger ballots (examples being Apsana Begum and Sam Tarry). Here is where the left is losing. The Socialist Campaign Group will probably be weaker in the new parliament. Already some of its members have found an accommodation with the leadership. Expect more of the members and MPs to rally around the leadership between now and the election.

Michael Calderbank makes a similar point in his piece on Labour Hub (28 September).

Maybe I'm just a "glass half empty" person, but I'm struggling to go along with [Andrew Fisher's assessment](#) that with this speech "Starmer has clearly... slammed the door on New Labour" or that it "owed more to Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell...than Tony Blair

Owen Jones also gets a bit carried away:

No government in British democratic history has so brazenly presented itself as class warriors for the rich – and with such immediately catastrophic consequences. In those circumstances, a Labour party that didn't position itself as the champion of working people would need to file for intellectual bankruptcy. And, in fairness, Starmer championed that class politics in his speech

although he does make some valid criticisms elsewhere in his article, suggesting that the Great British Energy Company would be a tokenistic gimmick.

If we take an ultra-left position and say there is no difference between Labour and the Tories and refuse to call for a vote for Labour, the left will cut itself off from many young and working-class people. The attraction of Starmer will grow in the run-up to the next election given the desperate situation people are in, the growing opinion poll lead of Labour and the lack of a political alternative.

Some young people I talked to recently who were very pro-Corbyn said that Starmer is an alternative to the Tory onslaught and that we had lost our chance of a more radical alternative with the defeat of the Corbyn project. They saw even a slogan of 'Vote Labour with no illusions, fight for more', as carping and weakening the campaign for a Labour government. They said it was a bit like Corbyn's lacklustre support for Remain at certain points (the 7 out of 10 formula). The left needs to think carefully about how we put forward our support for a Labour government while explaining its limits and the need for a socialist alternative.

Our Fight

Building support for all fights by working people against attacks on their living standards is a critical objective for serious leftists today, whether inside or outside the party. This Saturday, October 1st, **Enough is Enough** will be hosting a national day of action. The People's Assembly is joining alongside other campaigns. Developing these strikes and campaigns is the best approach to reinforce the correct political position for a Labour government to follow and help remove the Tories from power. These actions can have as big of an impact as any Labour conference in producing more radical recommendations for what the party should do next.

If the radical left wants to succeed in calling for the end of the Tory government and the election of a Labour government, it must be the primary architects of a true eco-socialist anti-capitalist alternative. There are activists both inside and outside of Labour who want to establish this alternative, and it is our job to collaborate with them and provide a democratic framework for debate and political organisation. A significant barrier to this viewpoint would be removed if the revolutionary left could overcome its internal conflicts

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P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 30 Sep 2022:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/labour-conference-sir-keir-rampant/>
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