

Britain: Starmer vs Lynch, different vision, different language

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Dave Kellaway evaluates the relative strengths of two of the movement's current leaders

All of us have been able to observe two different leaders of the labour movement in the last few weeks. On the one hand, we have Sir Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour party, who delivered the keynote speech at the Labour conference, and on the other hand, Mick Lynch, leader of the RMT (rail and maritime workers) union. Starmer went to university at Leeds and then Oxford and qualified as a barrister. He was knighted by the Queen after his stint as the head of the Crown Prosecution Service. Mick Lynch left school at 16 and later was blacklisted for organising building workers. He found work with Eurostar and, after years of work inside the RMT, was elected general secretary.

From the 1950s through to the 1970s, it was common to see working people coming through the trade union movement to become key figures in the Labour Party. Jim Callaghan, the prime minister from 1976 to 1979, was a good example of this trajectory. Alan Johnson, a minister in the Blair and Brown governments, is the most recent non-graduate Labour minister. This is becoming less and less common nowadays. Today, a more common path is from graduating to acting as a special advisor or aide to an MP, and then on to securing a safe seat. One thing the Mick Lynch media phenomenon should ignite is a discussion about how the movement can generate more working-class leaders.

What is striking about watching each of them perform is the different language they use and the stark contrast in their vision of society and the role of working people. Starmer has done his utmost to rid his party of any influence of Corbynism, which he judged unacceptable to the capitalist establishment. Such ideas and policies based on an opposition between the many and the few are disruptive of the agreed consensus of British politics. Today, Starmer clearly defines the party as reclaiming the centre ground and serving as the British people's "political wing."

Video - "Watch in full: Keir Starmer speaks at Labour party conference in Liverpool"

On the other hand, Lynch fights back when businesses attempt to restrain his members' and workers' ability to improve their living standards. He sees that there is a deep-seated hostility in contemporary society. Class warfare exists, and the working class is mobilising once more in this new wave of strikes to fight for its rights against the class enemy.

Video: "Mick Lynch's explosive speech to 10,000 at Enough is Enough rally"

It feels like the surge of Corbynism that tore the Labour Party apart is gaining momentum within the trade union movement. At the rally outside Kings Cross on 1st October, Jeremy Corbyn spoke towards the beginning and got a great reception from a crowd that included many young people, similar to those who flocked behind him in 2016. Lynch spoke last and got an even bigger cheer. Despite the fact that some union leaders, including Len McCluskey, were vocal backers of the Labour Party's leadership in 2016, the current wave of union activism did not occur during the 2016-2019 ascent of

Corbynism. Young activists who attend “Enough is Enough” rallies or ecological demonstrations (which are linked to trade union campaigns) do not join the Labour Party.

There is minimal internal threat to the Starmer team’s dominance of the party because the activity is occurring outside the organisation. This is true even if the action has a trickle-down impact on how some affiliated unions feel about the party’s policies. However, if the action were to deepen and extend, culminating in a direct showdown with the Truss government, then even Starmer may feel the heat. If the Tories are defeated through trade union struggle, then the Labour leadership will face a more confident, militant trade union movement in the coming years. Working people may disagree with his directive to refrain from pursuing “positive things that Labour would like to achieve” due to financial or monetary constraints imposed by his leadership.

Some trade union leaders are hoping that Sir Keir will come in and sort out the underlying causes of the current tensions, but that seems delusional. Starmer is deadly serious when he says he cannot openly support workers and that his shadow ministers should not join picket lines. He depicts Labour as a government in the making, one that will mediate between “the two sides of industry,” reaching settlements that will build a modernising alliance rather than one that satisfies all of the demands of striking workers.

The longer these strikes continue, with more workers joining in, the more we will see competition within the Labour movement between two conflicting narratives, two visions of our society. Starmer’s ideology is all about interpreting working-class aspirations and demands within the context of a non-antagonist society in which class conflict does not exist. He accepts that individual CEOs or businesses might be harsh or cruel to their employees. His rhetoric consistently obscures the systematic confrontation of class interests. Economic contradictions will be resolved by growth, “fairness,” modernisation, and technology. On the other hand, Lynch, while not explicitly asking for a radical break with capitalism and a socialist alternative, does reflect an underlying class consciousness that, if expanded upon, may lead to such conversations among working people.

We have created this little table, based on actual quotes from the two men, to show the different visions and language. As eco-socialists and anti-capitalists we know whose vision is the best starting point to building a movement that can really change our world.

Sir Keir Starmer (Leader of Labour Party)

I want to be crystal clear about this: I’m not just pro-business; I want to partner with business. So we will scrap business rates, level the playing field for start-ups and the high street, give employers new flexibility to invest in the world-class training they need.

A Labour government will sort out problems causing the cost of living crisis and the strikes

Some nation is going to lead the world in offshore wind. Why not this one? Some nation will win the race for electric vehicles. Why not us? Some nation will be the first to harness new hydrogen power. Why not Britain?

Labour has to behave as government in waiting and cannot take sides in these conflicts. Front bench members must not go on picket lines

Mick Lynch (Leader of RMT)

There is a class struggle between workers and the owners of companies they work for. Christian socialists, scientific socialists, Marxists and ordinary people have to understand we are in the middle of a class struggle and we have to win it.

Working class action can win these strikes and could bring this government down.

Bring water, gas, electric, rail and mail back into common ownership in order to ensure we have all these essential things (...) Problem is that the rich own the energy.

Every worker should support every strike and picket line. We need solidarity of the whole class. Rail workers support nurses, if we win everyone can win.

Sir Keir Starmer (Leader of Labour Party)

The only way forward is to stop this - with a Labour Government

Our success comes, first and foremost, from the hard work, the graft and the common sense of the British people.

A contract where in return for hard work, you get on. Where your contribution is always be respected. And which reaches through the generations to say Britain will be better for your children

It's time for Britain to stand tall again. To believe in ourselves again. To chart a new course. And to get our future back. Country first, party second

Working people and business produce the wealth

Mick Lynch (Leader of RMT)

We are going to come onto the streets, as a united working class and defeat this government, the time is now we are going to bring down this government

There are two elements in this society, wealth creators, workers and those who take that wealth, who consume it

There is a transfer of wealth from the working class to the rich. We pay our tax to protect our people not to subsidise the rich

Whoever is the next government you have to deliver a worker's agenda, that delivers wealth and power to our people.

Working people create the wealth of this country and the rich use it and consume it.

Dave Kellaway

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 05 Oct 2022:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/starmer-vs-lynch-different-vision-different-language/>
- Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti*Capitalist Resistance, a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.