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Britain

Corbyn for Labour leader – a remarkable campaign

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After the shock result of the British General election on May 7 in which the Conservatives won an outright majority, defeated Labour leader Ed Milliband announced his resignation within hours of the polls closing. Deputy leader Harriet Harman took over as acting leader and the process was set in train whereby a new leader of the Labour Party will be announced on September 12.

There will be four candidates on the ballot paper. Liz Kendall, currently bottom in opinion polls, is the most consistently right wing – an open admirer of former Prime Minister Tony Blair. Andy Burnham, former Shadow Health Minister and Yvette Cooper former Shadow Home Secretary are the candidates of the status quo.

Front runner Jeremy Corbyn is the candidate of the left. An active part of the anti-austerity movement, heavily involved in the anti-war movement, and a consistent supporter of the Palestinian people, Corbyn is rumoured to have broken the whip (refused to vote as instructed by the parliamentary group bosses) more than anyone else in Parliament.

Below we print a statement from Socialist Resistance on the remarkable campaign sparked by Corbyn's decision to stand.

The Corbyn campaign is a remarkable phenomenon. He actually stands a very good chance of winning the Labour leadership unless the Labour establishment can turn around the tide over the next six weeks.

As things stand, however, the tide remains with him. The Labour leadership are like rabbits in the headlights. Large numbers of people, young people in particular, are joining his campaign and people are flocking to his rallies and campaign events. Many are signing up to Labour as registered supporters or as affiliated supporters through their unions. [1] The support from major trade unions for Corbyn's candidacy has been extraordinary.

Labour has always been different from many of its fellow social democratic parties in having the direct affiliation of trade unions. Fourteen unions are affiliated and historically they have tended to act as a force against the left and to support the leadership establishment of the party. But the two largest trade unions affiliated to the party – Unite and Unison – have now both endorsed Corbyn.

The decision of the biggest union Unite (organising in the private sector), led by Len McCluskey, was not a particular surprise as it had been following a more left wing line in recent years, but the nomination of Corbyn by Unison is a major change in the situation. Unison is a major public sector union that has talked a lot against austerity and cuts to benefits and services, but has rarely organised action. At one time in the recent past Unison had the largest affiliated membership of the Labour Party and over one third of its million plus members are on its 'Labour Link' mailing list. A consultation exercise over the leadership election of Unison's 12 regions showed that nine of them wanted Corbyn nominating.

The Communication Workers Union is also a major national union with over 200,000 members. It not only nominated Corbyn, but General Secretary, Dave Ward, took to YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_b3Vh-EkSg&feature=youtu.be) to motivate its members to register to vote for Corbyn on the grounds of his policies and to signal a move to the left and against austerity in the party.

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Corbyn also has the nominations of several smaller unions, such as the Bakers Union, transport union the TSSA and train drivers union ASLEF, while the other large affiliate, the general union GMB, has declined to nominate any of the four candidates – a blow for the right.

As we near the closing date for supporting nominations, Corbyn also has a massive lead in nominations over his rivals from local party branches (Constituency Labour Parties – CLPs) with over 130 nominations (from 600+) compared to around 100 for other challengers.

Corbyn's campaign has made major inroads into three areas – traditional party members organised in constituencies (local bodies based on geographical voting areas), affiliated trade unionists and new, overwhelmingly young, members and supporters of the party. This is a profoundly radicalising development, whichever way the vote goes.

If Corbyn wins and sets off in an anti-austerity direction, major new possibilities will open up including a probable split by the Blairites. If he loses he will have encouraged and radicalised a lot of young people and trade union activists, strengthened the left in the Labour Party, and exerted leftward pressure on whoever does win.

Tony Benn failed to win the deputy leadership of the Labour Party in 1981 (albeit by a tiny margin) after a massive campaign with a big and vibrant Labour Left and a large and militant trade union movement in a period of industrial militancy. Now Corbyn is on the cusp of winning the Labour leadership with a (more or less) non-existent organised Labour left, a very weak trade union movement and historically low strike levels.

Some of the factors involved are clear. Labour lost an election that it clearly could and should have won and the reason it lost was because it tail ended the Tory cuts agenda. This was followed by Harriet Harman's appalling decision not to oppose Osborne's budget (which ended up with her position outflanked to the left by the Lib Dems and unionist parties). All the other contenders for the Labour Leadership not only supported her in that but further collapsed into the Tory agenda by toeing the line that Labour had lost the election because the campaign had been too far to the left and that the progressive policies that it did adopt should now be dropped.

Conviction politics is playing a role in this. People inside the Labour Party and outside find it a breath of fresh air to find someone in the Labour leadership contest who says what they mean and means what they says in a non-egotistic way.

It is also clear that Scottish politics are also a part of this development, not just the radicalising influence of the independence referendum, and the rise of the SNP, but also the role of the SNP MPs in Parliament since the election. They have been in effect the real opposition for the Tories as shown in the vote against benefit cuts where the SNP's 55 votes outnumbered the votes of 47 Labour MPs, led by Corbyn, who defied the leadership.

The recent 'maiden' (first) speech in parliament by new SNP MP Mhairi Black, at 20 years of age the youngest MP for centuries, challenged Labour to oppose the Tory benefit cuts and declared Tony Benn one of her heroes. The YouTube video of that speech became one of the most watched parliamentary speeches in Britain ever, as it clocked up millions of hits online, many from young people.

A few months ago it seemed unlikely that Corbyn would even get on the ballot paper. He only secured the necessary 35 nominations of MPs with two minutes to spare and after a number of right wing MPs agreed to nominate him, ostensibly to give the opportunity for Andy Burnham to appear as a middle-of-the-road candidate rather than the most leftwing person in the race.

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Of Corbyn's nominators only 18 followed him in voting against the benefit cuts. The gulf between the parliamentary party and the base of the membership in the trade unions and the party at large is massive. A Corbyn leadership would struggle to fill the Shadow Cabinet meeting room with his handful of MP supporters and there is a danger that he would become a hostage to the parliamentary party if he did not organise more extensively his supporters in the party at large.

While the left in the Labour Party have created a strong united challenge, the right wing is in disarray, with allegations against each other descending into puerile abuse such as calling each other 'morons' in public. Right wing MPs are openly talking about a 'coup', overturning a Corbyn leadership by the parliamentary party alone, or even a split modelled on the creation of the short-lived Social Democratic Party (SDP) of the 1980s (not a glorious example to emulate).

This is not to say that everything Jeremy Corbyn is saying is right. He seems to have nothing to say on the environment or on electoral reform which are massive issues since the last election.

A Corbyn victory, however, or indeed a close second, would be a victory for the whole of the left. It would open up the political situation in Britain and radicalise a lot of people particularly young people. Whether it split the Labour Party or not it would create completely new conditions for anti-austerity politics in England.

Left Unity has rightly welcomed Corbyn's campaign from the beginning understanding its significance and its progressive dynamic.

The conditions for the creation of a new left wing alternative in Britain exist now more than ever. A key task of the coming period will be to unite all those forces that believe in challenging austerity, climate change and resisting the Tory government and its implementation of the neo-liberal consensus. A change in the Labour Party leadership would have a massive effect, but in order to become really significant and sustainable it also needs to reach out and link up with the millions of people who voted Green or SNP or Plaid Cymru (or the smaller socialist groups) in the general election, those who support Left Unity and especially the millions of young people resisting austerity.

[1] According to Labour List in late June the figures were registered supporters: 9,115, affiliated supporters: 3,788 while the number of full members has also grown significantly since the general election.