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Britain

# Starmer tightens grip over Labour

- Features -

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**The annual conference of the British Labour Party, held on 25-29 September 2021 in Brighton, was intended to legitimize and establish the leadership at the head of the party since April 2020, the health situation having disrupted and delayed the organization of the usual ceremonial procedures over the past 18 months. It was therefore an opportunity for the leader of the party, Keir Starmer, to obtain the full formal and symbolic validation of his orientation since his election. A central political issue in this context was the confirmation of the position of the general secretary of the party, David Evans, chosen by Starmer and also at the helm since April 2020. The expulsion of filmmaker Ken Loach from the party in mid-August came before this conference.**

Let us begin with the circumstances and the motive of this measure, which alone says a lot about this immediate political conjuncture. Loach's expulsion is what is called, in good Labour bureaucratic language, "auto-exclusion": according to the party's internal rules (Chapter 6.1.2), any member who joins, or supports a candidate other than Labour, or a political organisation other than Labour, or who stands against a Labour candidate, "automatically" loses any right to remain a member. Unlike disciplinary proceedings, "auto-exclusions" therefore do not go through any particular internal procedure, are not the subject of any consultation by the national authorities, and do not authorize an appeal or a defence.

Loach was subjected to "auto-exclusion" for having expressed on a social network his solidarity with four small organizations internal to Labour, which had themselves just been excluded, deemed "toxic" and "poisonous"; one for having challenged the all-out accusations of anti-Semitism, another for having welcomed members of the party already expelled in order to defend their reintegration, the others for their commitment to socialism and Marxism. Loach's expulsion indicates several things at once. It is part of an intense enterprise of expulsion and demoralization of everything that resembles the left within the party: the Labour leaders of Labour do not even have the hypocritical pretension of maintaining the simulacrum of an open and diverse party, and thus to protect themselves from accusations of right-wing and sectarian hyper-factionalism.

## Open war

The suspension of Corbyn himself from the Parliamentary Labour Party a year ago, on totally fraudulent grounds, had opened the war. Loach's expulsion tells us that it is now raging and gives a fair idea of its magnitude. The purge goes on, even if it means openly trampling on internal procedures and violating the recommendations of the report of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC); even if it means sinking into the most laughable confusion. Examples of the grotesque are now legion and never cease to amaze, like the letter notifying "auto-exclusion" to activists on the basis of having liked Facebook messages issued by some of the groups already expelled at the end of July.

In mid-September, Jess Barnard, chair of the party's youth organization, received an email late at night sent on behalf of the party's national executive committee, notifying her of an internal investigation notice against her for challenging transphobic remarks online. A few days later, left-wing MP Kate Osborne received a similar notice for non-compliance with internal regulations: in a tweet, Osborne had written "Solidarity!" to her colleague Rebecca Long-Bailey, close to Corbyn and a former shadow education minister who Starmer had sacked for encouraging "anti-Semitic conspiracy" theories, although the real reason was her stubborn political divergence from Boris Johnson's schools policy during the health crisis. (Long-Bailey had shared a political tweet from actress Maxine

Peake in which, among other things, Peake drew a connection between the circumstances of George Floyd's death and Israeli police techniques.)

Faced with Barnard and Osborne's responses and their threats of legal action, the notices were promptly cancelled on the grounds that they were "mistakes." The explanation was not likely to convince: party employees do not dig through tweets "by mistake" to write and send disciplinary notices. The harassment and intimidation of ordinary activists is clearly less self-evident. More obviously, this kind of hunt for incriminating tweets had been practiced en masse during the summer of 2016 against tens of thousands of new members. The aim then was to ban them from participating in the internal vote for the leadership of the party following the attempted ouster of Corbyn by members of the Parliamentary Labour Party. At the time, the party's cadres and leadership changed the conditions of participation to prevent 130,000 people who had joined the party in the previous months from participating in the election. This was no more a "mistake" in 2021 than in 2016.

There was no respite however for rank and file activist, Graham Durham, expelled at the beginning of September for having expressed his wish that the conference should see a challenge to the leadership of Starmer by other candidates, a demand nevertheless made by Labour parliamentarians eager to get rid of Corbyn a few years earlier. More revealingly, the party is investigating one member for criticising another member's disagreement with certain points of the Labour manifesto for the December 2019 parliamentary elections: this would allegedly involve discrimination against a different belief (of people "who don't believe in a four-day working-week and giving people free broadband"), these preferences being then de facto elevated to the rank of "protected characteristics". [\[1\]](#)

Incriminating "evidence" now includes a Facebook post in which a particular activist signalled their interest in "Britain's Road to Socialism", the Communist Party programme, the sharing of a Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) post opposing Boris Johnson's visit to Scotland, or a Socialist Workers' Party sign visible in a photo of a demonstration (where there are always many SWP placards) used as a header to a twitter account. [\[2\]](#)

In recent months, in addition to the myriad individual notifications (investigations, suspensions, expulsions), many regional party officials have intervened in the life of local branches to extinguish any democratic life at the rank and file level: meetings or annual general meetings summarily cancelled or adjourned, participants excluded from online meetings, collective suspensions of entire branches, changes to agendas, bans pronounced against draft motions in support of Corbyn, bans on discussion of the 2020 EHCR report on anti-Semitism (in strict contravention of the guarantees given by the internal regulations). [\[3\]](#)

There is also the long list of notices of suspension, investigation, and "auto-expulsion" issued to Jewish activists on the left of the party, for "anti-Semitism." The assault had begun under Corbyn. It continues with redoubled efforts over the past ten months. The socialist organization JVL (Jewish Voice for Labour) is a recurring target of these attacks. And not surprisingly, there is no one in the mainstream British media to denounce this systematic attack on Jewish activists who are socialists, anti-colonialists and in solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

## The Labour apparatus keeps control

The first political consequence of this systematic obstruction was the obstacle to the regular nomination by local branches of conference delegates, the appointment of candidates for internal responsibilities, debates on motions or changes to the party's operating rules. However, there were at least three priorities for the left at this conference: obtaining the definitive side-lining of the general secretary, the right of local branches to democratically choose their parliamentary candidate ("open selection") and making the parliamentary party formally accountable to the congress. These would be necessary and encouraging achievements. The expulsion of Loach, after the suspension of Corbyn,

was therefore intended to ensure the general demoralization of a left of the party that is also systematically weakened organizationally, in line with the view once expressed by Evans that “representative democracy should, as far as possible, be abolished in the Labour Party.” [\[4\]](#)

Concerning the great socialist film director, it is worth remembering that this hostility is not new. A war of attrition has been waged against him for years: accusations of anti-Semitism and negationism, and the campaign (2018) and petition to dissuade the Free University of Brussels from awarding him the title of Doctor honoris causa. A few years earlier, in reaction to Loach's films about Ireland and the crimes of the British colonial order, “Hidden Agenda” and “The Wind That Shakes the Barley,” journalists from the “Times” and “Daily Telegraph” said that Loach was even worse than Hitler's propagandist Leni Riefenstahl.

It must nevertheless be remembered that this episode reflects a history that is about as old as the Labour Party itself. Labour is a contradictory assemblage of forces (political, trade union) united not in a spirit of compromise and mutual tolerance, but in a constrained and precarious adaptation to an electoral system that leaves little chance to forces not integrated into the two dominant political formations. The anger directed against Corbyn was preceded by that to which Tony Benn and Nye Bevan had already been subjected in the post-war period and in the 1970s and 80s. Corbyn's novelty in this history was that he was the first representative of the socialist left to gain leadership and thus to be in a position to become prime minister. The struggle to preserve the prerogatives of the parliamentary Labour elite against democratic demands for control of the party by its rank and file has left behind many traces of ruthless confrontations.

In this, Starmer and Evans are not content to restore a totally decayed Blairism, they are part of the longer trajectory of an Atlanticist Labour conformism, ardently anti-Communist, colonialist and militarist (as the inhabitants of many parts of the world know so well, from the Malaysian rubber plantations to Guyana). The expulsion of Ken Loach signals a seemingly new stage, however: the current leadership seems to have set itself the sole political objective of eliminating the left of the party outright. This offensive, under the banner of anti-Corbyn hatred, is now the only party orientation identified, clear and defended with determination, in transgression of the party's own internal rules if necessary. The shadow foreign secretary recently went so far as to declare that she was ready to campaign in Corbyn's own constituency in order to drive him out of Parliament once and for all: a real prospect of hope and urgency after 150,000 deaths due to the pandemic, and such a fraternal sign to millions of people who have recognized themselves in the politics as well as in the personality of this leader.

The “broad church” party is gone, this is the message and priority now. The Starmer-Evans tandem will therefore, in this case, have not only purged the Labour Party of an emblematic figure, with international prestige, of the socialist currents within Labour, but in doing so, the whole reactionary British bipartisan norm is purified. A service rendered to the entire official nation, so to speak.

## Labour engulfed in crisis

It remains to be seen what the current calculation can be. Faced with the disastrous clientelist cynicism of the Johnson government in the management of the health crisis, its appalling attacks on workers, the increase in all forms of poverty, despair and social abandonment experienced by entire sectors of British society, shouldn't public opinion naturally end up turning around? Moreover, haven't Blair's past victories demonstrated that we can do without a broad and politicised party, capable of energizing and developing social movements and able to defend new democratic advances?

Things seem likely to go very wrong, however, from the very point of view of the current management. The departure

of about 120,000 members over more than a year, and the rich donors who still do not come forward, has quickly resulted in serious financial difficulties: the decision was taken in the middle of the summer to lay off ninety employees (a quarter of the staff). A strike was therefore voted for by 75% against this redundancy plan (itself accompanied by managerial jargon emanating from the general secretary bordering on self-parody). [5]

The hole in the coffers promises to become gaping now that a number of trade union organizations and not the least important (Unite, GMB, CWU, FBU, RMT) are considering, at best, reducing their contributions, always so crucial for the party, or at worst, outright disaffiliation. This is particularly the case of the bakers' union, the BFAWU, linked to Labour since 1902, whose national secretary, Ian Hodson, was himself threatened with "auto-exclusion" for his links with one of the four organisations excluded at the end of July. Labour therefore intends to expel without appeal the national leader of a trade union organisation constitutionally linked to the party, which participates in its financing and the life of its bodies, for simple links with a group of party activists.

Added to these self-inflicted wounds there have been humiliating results in former Labour strongholds in the last year's by-elections, and damning polls for Labour and Starmer himself, who the media have so warmly welcomed. The political priorities of the main "opposition" party have become a mystery to even the most benevolent commentary, to the point of turning into a national joke: in a TV interview on a morning television programme, questioned on what Labour stands for today, shadow health minister Jon Ashworth said that the discussions of the shadow cabinet could not be shared with the country because they were "confidential meetings".

To sum up, the expulsion of Ken Loach must draw our attention to the massive purge and ongoing demoralisation of everything left-wing in the party. It is in this respect that it constitutes a significant fact which in this case is not explicitly linked to the accusations of anti-Semitism (which of course are part of the scenery). This bout of fever illustrates the panic induced by the recent surge of the left. The moment is therefore one of reaction. These internal struggles are as old as Labour itself but seem to have reached an unprecedented qualitative threshold.

The Labour of the Starmer-Evans tandem therefore has a compass: unconditional and self-flagellating genuflection after the years of appalling threats to the order of the Kingdom's political conveniences. This Labour has a line: going along with Johnson's jovial quackery on almost all subjects, with a few rhetorical adjustments, all in the name of a constructive and responsible "opposition" that even involves saluting the latest militarist and neo-imperialist ventures in the China Sea, despite the immense dangers that flow from this. It remains to be seen whether such a party ever comes to power with its intolerance, its contempt for any democratic internal practices and for any elementary rule of law. Such a risk remains distant, however. It remains above all to be hoped that the British left in all its existing forms will succeed in regaining lasting organizational cohesion when the subjects of struggle become as literally vital as they are now: health, mental health, climate, poverty (for the elderly, children, at work...), all against a hushed background of imperialist ferocity. Some of the achievements at this conference, despite the strong headwinds, could be a positive signal.

PS:

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[1] <https://skwawkbox.org/2021/09/11/labour-tells-member-it-considers-political-disagreement-a-hate-crime/>

[2] <https://labouroutlook.org/2021/03/29/evans-left-purge-the-abuse-of-auto-exclusion-by-labours-hq>

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[3] <https://www.jewishvoiceforlabour.org.uk/article/labours-activist-base-is-being-gutted-from-within>

[4] When he was deputy general secretary under Blair between 1999 and 2001.

[5] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-starmer-jobs-cut-election-b1904088.html>