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Britain

All hands on deck to help Jeremy Corbyn win

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“Jeremy Corbyn has touched parts of the electorate Labour hasn’t reached in a long time” writes Andy Stowe. That was the judgement of Laura Kuenssberg, the Tory propagandist who delivers most of the BBC’s political coverage, reporting on the decision by Labour’s national executive committee (NEC) to allow the party’s leader appear on the ballot paper in the upcoming leadership election. And it goes a long way to explaining why he’s now going to be in a contest with former Pfizer lobbyist Owen Smith and Angela Eagle who romped into fourth place with a stonking 17.9% of the vote when she stood for the deputy leadership last year. It can’t be repeated too often that Corbyn won 59.5% of the vote when he was elected last year.

It was touch and go through most of Tuesday July 12 if that would be the result. A ferocious dirty tricks campaign was rolled out. Corbyn supporters were blamed because a window was broken in the constituency office of challenger Angela Eagle. None of the journalists covering the most high-profile broken window in recent years managed to point out that the office is a short distance from three pubs and has a long history of low-level anti-social behaviour. That was typical of the sort of nonsense that the undead Blairite spin doctors were feeding their friends in the press.

Unions crucial

The key to Corbyn’s victory at the NEC was the support of the unions. Len McCluskey, general secretary of Unite, the biggest union in the British state, was on radio and TV for several days saying:

“we have seen a cowardly attack launched against the party’s elected leader which has deprived the country of all parliamentary opposition and let the Conservatives off scot-free in their moment of turmoil.”

And the reason for his support for Corbyn was very simple:

“Jeremy Corbyn has always – always – stood by us, stood on the picket lines, joined our campaigns, argued our case in parliament, advocated for workers’ rights.”

Unison’s Labour Link committee met on Friday July 8 and strongly supported Corbyn – a message that General Secretary Dave Prentis made a special trip to the Durham Miner’s Gala to convey in the strongest possible terms on Saturday. The GMB’s Tim Roache also made a strongly pro Corbyn speech in Durham, while the CWU’s Dave Ward has been consistently speaking out against the plotters.

The votes of union representatives were essential to the decision to permit Corbyn to appear on the ballot paper. This is a massive problem for the parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) which is largely Blairite and overwhelmingly hostile to Corbyn’s radical, anti-austerity, outward looking politics. They know that their candidate is going to be humiliated. Her support for Trident and the Iraq war combined with her reluctance to distance herself from Tony Blair render laughable her claim to be a candidate of the left. In her media appearances before the NEC result she never really gave the impression of someone who was convinced that she was a serious candidate. Now that she is going up against the most popular leader of a party British politics has ever known she has the demeanour of someone who thought they’d bought a ticket to an exhibition of Japanese painting only to find out she’s arrived at an evening class of seppuku for beginners.

And there had been speculation for days that Owen Smith would throw his hat into the ring after talks between Eagle

and he broke down in the run up to Chilcot. Now that has happened, making the prospects for both non-Corbyn candidates even worse.

The right's limited options

The right's options are limited but explosive. They may choose to split and realign with the Liberal Democrats now that they know they've lost the unions. That will be very damaging because most MPs and councillors are to the right of the membership and in the current undemocratic electoral system, a divided left and very soft left vote ensures a Tory government in the next election. Or they might just hunker down for a war of attrition trying to make Corbyn's life unbearable in parliament and the media. However as they've learned in recent weeks, that very gentle exterior belies a real political toughness.

Corbyn won a big victory at the NEC and it has excited the hundreds of thousands of people who joined the party to back him. But while it was big it was not total. The Mirror reports:

"Labour members who have signed up after Tuesday, January 12 will not be eligible to vote.

That means the claimed 100,000 new members the party claims they have attracted since the referendum will be excluded from the process.

But they may still be able to take part in the vote if they're willing to stump up a £25 "registered supporter" fee.

Applications to be a registered supporter will only be open for two days – and it's currently unclear whether those who became members since January 12 will also be allowed to sign up as registered supporters."

It's unlikely that this was done to minimise the impact of the dozens of Eagle supporters who joined Labour in the last few days. According to one report the right wing of the NEC waited until:

"a couple of pro-Corbyn members had left, and Corbyn himself had gone, a vote was taken on a motion not on the agenda, to exclude from the leadership vote anyone who joined the party in the past six months. So the 130,000 who signed up since Brexit, most of whom are thought to be Corbyn supporters, will be unable to vote.

Now whatever you think of Corbyn, this looks and smells like gerrymandering by his opponents."

How to help Corbyn

There are lots of things Labour Party members and Corbyn supporters outside the party can do. The task now is to mobilise every vote for Corbyn.

Hundreds of thousands have poured into the party in the past year, with all the evidence being most of them are pro-Corbyn. Many will be people with little culture or tradition in the party, may not have been to meetings and it may be difficult to organise them. However lots of them are getting their information from social media and other networks and that favours the Corbyn campaign. We are really seeing the emergence of social media as an organising tool in British politics.

While the NEC predictably tightened up the rules about registered supporters and also introduced an unprecedented waiting time for new members, that doesn't mean anyone who wasn't a full member in January can't vote. If you are a member of an affiliated organisation listed here or become one by August 8 and ask for a vote here by August 8 you can vote. And this list includes Unite Community which unwaged people can join for 50p per week. And there is still a short window for people to sign up at £25 – we understand from Monday – Wednesday next week though the Labour Party hasn't updated its website since the NEC meeting so it's difficult to be sure.

Women and LGBTIQ support

Momentum may well not be capable of organising all these people. It is the best vehicle available and should be the centralising organising focus, it will have to reach out far beyond its existing membership and influence. There are tens of thousands who will vote Corbyn but don't identify with Momentum. Many constituency Labour parties (CLPs) have already backed Corbyn – more than 80% of those that have met since the attempted coup. A meeting of all such CLPs and a campaign to get more on board through emergency meetings, along with national unions and well known figures could come together to reach out further perhaps than Momentum could.

If – and increasingly it looks like a big if – Angela Eagle does challenge Corbyn, one of her lines of attack will be the fact that Corbyn is a man. Women who support Corbyn need to urgently discuss the best way of undercutting this. Similarly Eagle has been targeting the LGBTIQ press so there needs to be a more visible LGBTIQ support for Corbyn.

Every single voter needs to be spoken to. This means volunteering the staff the phone banks that were such an important part of the original Corbyn election victory last year. It means going door to door. This is big work. Many wards now have hundreds of members and the left inside the Labour Party has to think about organising its own events as the only thing that will be allowed during the leadership contest is a single item nominating meeting (unless there is a local by election).

All this is happening at the worst time of year. People are taking their summer holidays and internal labour movement meetings have largely closed down for the summer and the agreement from the NEC doesn't allow official hustings so these will need to be organised outside the formal structures – though official lists can as far as I can see be used to mobilise for them and we should fight for that.

Corbyn will carry the membership and in a few months we could have a Labour Party with hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic members ready to fight the Tories and a leadership that is up to the job. These are exciting times in British politics.