

British Labour's divisive Equality Bill

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The government's Equality Bill has been condemned as "socialism in one clause" by Britain's right wing and a "landmark" in overcoming inequalities by the liberal media and the trade unions.

It is neither. Far from promoting equality in any meaningful sense, the bill continues Labour's reactionary advocacy of identity politics as political window dressing for the growth of class inequality under its rule.

The government claims that its aim is to "harmonise" existing equality laws so as to provide "straightforward practical guidance for employers, service providers and public bodies."

But the bill is not simply a consolidation of current legislation. It marks a further step towards the adoption of affirmative action measures, or "positive discrimination" as it is known in the UK, which, especially under conditions of a global economic recession, has the most divisive implications.

Most indicative of the bill's true purpose is the fact that the review body responsible for drawing together various proposals complained that traditional approaches to resolving inequality were "not fit...in today's Britain" due to their focus on "income or wealth."

Launching the bill, Labour's deputy leader, Harriet Harman, claimed that it chimed with the new mood created by the economic recession. "The whole issue of fairness has come centre stage," she said. Presenting Labour as the party of equality, she continued, "We know that inequality is grounded not just in gender, race, disability, age and sexual orientation, but also by class."

This reluctant acknowledgement of class inequality has indeed been forced on the government. But its reduction to just one of many other forms of discrimination is integral to the politics of affirmative action, which aims to conceal the fact that class is the

fundamental source of inequality under capitalism.

To recognise this is not to minimise sexual or racial inequalities and the persistence of discrimination. It is a matter of record that unemployment and low pay remain higher amongst women, certain ethnic minorities and disabled people.

Overcoming this, however, requires a political struggle aimed at abolishing the root cause of social inequality—the profit system and the forms of social organisation based upon it.

Labour's proposals are in opposition to this perspective. So determined is it not to infringe on big business that its "equality" measures will apply only to the public sector, after they were vetoed by private employers.

The bill proposes to "expand the way positive action" can be used so that employers can select someone for a job from "an underrepresented group." It suggests that decisions on the awarding of public contracts, worth a total of £175 billion, should take into account a company's "equality" record.

The government denies this amounts to positive discrimination, "which will remain unlawful."

This assurance is absurd, given that the stated aim of the new measures is to increase the number of women, in particular, in certain workplaces, by privileging them over other applicants.

Harman has stated explicitly that the bill is "about saying 'because you are a woman I'm going to put you in this promotion,'" claiming that it would make City of London boardrooms, as well as the Houses of Parliament and the upper echelons of the police, more "representative."

Her statement underscores that the new measures have nothing to do with the interests of working people. The government hopes through its legislation to provide discredited and hated institutions with some veneer of political credibility. But the gender, race

and/or sexual orientation of the owners and representatives of the capitalist profit system make not one iota of difference to those they exploit, as is proven by the experience of Margaret Thatcher in Britain, and now Barack Obama in the United States.

More fundamentally, “positive action” is based on the premise that there is no possibility of expanding limited resources or producing any fundamental change in the social set-up. Rather, in order for *some* sections of the population to progress, others must go without.

This policy has a long and wholly regressive pedigree. It was first systematically promoted in the United States under the Republican administration of Richard Nixon in response to the civil rights movement and the inner-city rebellions of the 1960s.

Through policies of affirmative action the bourgeoisie sought to cultivate a privileged layer of the African-American middle class and utilise it as a social and political bulwark against the working class. The result has been that while the likes of Obama, Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell have “made it” into the ruling upper echelons, the conditions of minority workers and youth—like those of the working class as a whole—have deteriorated.

In Britain, the more cautious advocacy of affirmative action has been intimately connected to the Labour Party’s abandonment of its historic links with the working class and its repudiation of social reforms.

In the 1980s, caught between popular opposition to the Conservative government of Thatcher and its own adaptation to the right-wing agenda of free market deregulation, the Labour Party—especially its nominal “left” wing—embraced identity politics.

Increasingly, social policy became determined by race, gender and sexual orientation. Not only was this, in effect, a form of means-testing resources, politically it served to undermine working class unity against the assault on social services, welfare and democratic rights.

Some quarter of a century on, the share of total household income held by the top fifth of the population has risen from 36 to 42 percent, while falling amongst the bottom 60 percent of the population, declining from 10 percent in the poorest fifth to approximately seven percent. The share of gross domestic product (GDP) going to wages and salaries has fallen over approximately the same period, from 65

percent to 53 percent in 2008.

Meanwhile, Labour’s neo-colonialist agenda, coupled with its “war on terror” and anti-immigrant demagogy, has led to an increase in the harassment of minorities, while the squeeze on public spending has meant an absence of well-resourced, inexpensive child care facilities, further trapping many mothers in low paid employment.

More damagingly, Labour’s policies of “positive action” have exacerbated divisions—segregating neighbourhoods and forcing working people into an internecine struggle for a dwindling number of jobs, educational opportunities and public services.

This, in turn, has played into the hands of the right wing, whose condemnation of “political correctness gone mad” has been used to divert from the truly spectacular special privileges afforded a tiny and fabulously wealthy elite.

The fight for genuine equality, including the defence of democratic rights against all forms of discrimination, cannot be separated from a political struggle against the capitalist system. Only the abolition of class domination and the reorganisation of economic, social and political life in the interests of the vast majority can provide the basis for a truly egalitarian society.

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