

Labour in crisis and Reform UK gaining ground—build the Socialist Equality Party!

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It has taken the Labour Party just six months to earn the level of popular hostility it took the Tory Party more than a decade of austerity governments to achieve.

According to YouGov data, close to two thirds of Britons have an unfavourable view of the Labour government, and less than one in five are favourable towards it. More of the people who voted for Labour at the last election—which was just 17 percent of those with the right to vote—have a negative view of the government (38 percent) than a positive view (34 percent).

Millions rightly see no difference between Labour and the Conservative Party. The government has fully earned its unpopularity: scrapping winter fuel payments for millions of pensioners, keeping millions of children in poverty by refusing to remove the punitive two-child benefit cap, launching repeated attacks on the National Health Service to prepare the way for further privatisation, restricting public sector pay rises to below inflation, ordering “efficiency” cuts in all government departments, ramping up war threats against Russia, backing Israel’s genocide in Gaza and carrying out a record crackdowns on migrants.

The Socialist Equality Party predicted this state of affairs, writing the day after the election:

Sir Keir Starmer takes his place at the head of a Labour government on a collision course with the British working class. He owes his “landslide” victory entirely to the hatred with which the Conservative government of the last 14 years was viewed, the thoroughly undemocratic first-past-the-post system, and the fact that widespread left-wing sentiment has found no organised socialist expression.

These factors have placed a new reactionary monster in power, far to the right of any previous Labour leader, with little more than a third of the popular vote on a near record-low turnout...

The question many workers and young people around the country will be asking themselves, just a couple of days after handing Rishi Sunak’s Tories an unprecedented electoral defeat, is: “How do we get rid of their replacements?”

In its November 2024 Congress resolution, “War, the class struggle and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party”, the SEP argued that “The working class is in uncharted territory and none of the old methods of struggle will suffice.” We explained that Starmer’s ability to win the election essentially by default was thanks to the political betrayal of the working class first by Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party and then by the trade union bureaucracy, insisting:

Everything depends on freeing workers from the stranglehold of

the trade union leaderships and a Labour Party that still exercise a malign influence on a working class disconnected from Marxism and its own traditions of class struggle. Reforging those connections means a political and organisational break with Labour and the union bureaucracy, fought for against the combined efforts of the pseudo-left groups to oppose such a break.

Starmer is leader of the Labour Party, let alone of the country, thanks to Corbyn and his supporters’ systematic demobilisation of the movement which saw him elected as Labour leader, twice, in the face of a witch-hunt of the hundreds of thousands of workers and young people who joined the party to vote for him. They wanted and expected a fight against the politics of austerity and war that had been jointly pursued by the Blairite Labour and Tory parties.

That promise won broad support, even after Corbyn’s retreats on issues such as NATO membership and nuclear weapons, with Labour gaining 10 percentage points to 40 percent of the vote in the 2017 general election on a high 69 percent turnout—dwarfing Starmer’s vote haul. The result reversed 20 years of decline and stagnation of the Labour vote share and deprived Tory Prime Minister Theresa May of her majority.

But in the face of a counteroffensive by a rattled ruling class—centred on manufactured allegations of a mass “left-wing antisemitism crisis” in the Labour Party and claims that it presented an “existential threat” to British Jews—Corbyn’s capitulation was total. Demoralising his supporters, Corbyn lost 2.5 million votes on his 2017 performance and was defeated by Boris Johnson in the 2019 election, which he took as his cue to quietly hand the party back over to Starmer.

As the SEP’s resolution explains:

Starmer’s government was forged in a six-year campaign of mass purges against the party’s membership under the codename ‘Operation Icepick’, with thousands of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s supporters branded as antisemites and expelled or driven out of the party—purges enabled through Corbyn’s own cowardice and complicity.

The second factor allowing the Blairites back in the saddle was the treacherous role played by the trade union bureaucracy. Even after Corbyn handed the political initiative to Starmer, there was still a strong determination in the working class for a fight, exacerbated by the pandemic and manifesting in the strike wave of 2022-4. Millions of workers took action to reverse over a decade of falling living standards. The potential existed for a general strike.

The SEP’s Congress resolution explains how the party:

intervened to combat the role of the trade union bureaucracy as an industrial police force for the corporations and the state. We insisted that the working class must establish rank-and-file committees to organise workers independently of and against the trade union bureaucracy and open a new road for the class struggle, centred on unifying British workers with their class brothers and sisters internationally in opposition to the pro-capitalist economic nationalism of the bureaucracy. This fight could not be waged purely at the level of industrial militancy. The systematic preparation of a general strike would have as its aim the bringing down of the Conservative government and the fight to build an alternative socialist leadership to the Labour Party.

But this movement was sabotaged by a series of sellouts orchestrated by the trade union leaderships, paving the way for the Starmer government, “the continued accumulation of vast wealth at the apex of society” and “the striving of the financial oligarchy to secure Britain’s imperialist interests through political and military alliance with Washington.”

With the class struggle suppressed and Labour in power, opportunity has been given to the far-right to scapegoat migrants for the deep social grievances of the working class.

As things stand, the main beneficiary of the Labour government’s tailspin is Nigel Farage’s Reform UK. The party has climbed from 14 percent of the vote in the election to 22 percent in polls today. According to YouGov, immigration is the second most-commonly raised concern in the population, after the economy, with 70 percent of people now saying it is “too high”, 50 percent “much too high” and 43 percent “mostly bad for the country” over the past decade—versus 18 percent who answer, “mostly good”.

These are sobering statistics for socialists; they alone demand a ruthless critique of what has passed for “the left” in the last period. The SEP’s Congress resolution describes the growth of the far-right as “the product of the toxic atmosphere of nationalism and xenophobia created over decades by successive Labour and Conservative governments and the social despair engendered by endless austerity that the far-right exploits.” All of which has been made possible by the prolonged suppression of a left-wing movement in the working class.

This is an international phenomenon. Marine Le Pen’s National Rally and the Alternative for Germany are advancing in France and Germany. Giorgia Meloni is already in power in Italy and calling the shots in the European Union. She may soon be joined by Herbert Kickl of the Freedom Party in Austria. The most significant expression of this recrudescence of fascism internationally is the incoming US administration of Donald Trump—whose henchman Elon Musk is now offering to bankroll Reform UK, in exchange for its welcoming the fascist thugs of Tommy Robinson openly into the fold.

Our resolution explains of Trump’s victory in the US election:

The key role in Trump’s ascendancy has been played by the Democratic Party and its allies in the AFL-CIO trade union bureaucracy... The Democrats responded to the January 6 coup with a systematic attempt to buttress the Republican Party, which it portrayed as a victim of Trump, while the trade unions suppressed and betrayed all opposition to the economic distress suffered by millions under Biden’s presidency. Young people especially turned their backs on the Democratic Party because of its advocacy of war with Ukraine and support for Israel’s genocide, allowing Trump to pose as a peacemaker. This was compounded by the Democrats’ promotion of divisive identity politics, tailored to an upper middle class seeking only personal

self-advancement and nakedly hostile to the suffering of working people which Trump claimed to represent.

Answering the challenge from the right means carrying out a socialist struggle to address workers’ demands for jobs, wages and housing, and quality transport, education, health and social care—a programme inseparable from the fight against war and for universal democratic rights. To wage such a fight, the working class needs a new party, a revolutionary party.

The SEP’s election campaign, waged directly against Starmer, was focussed on this crucial task. We were alone on the left in our total opposition to the Labour Party, against groups like the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party who called for a vote for Labour candidates as a “lesser evil”, except in a handful of seats where independent candidates stood on a platform of opposition to the Gaza genocide. This amounted to support for the election of Starmer’s right-wing, warmongering government, with the role of “opposition” bestowed upon a few tame MPs led by Corbyn.

Above all, it diverted workers from conclusion set out in our resolution:

The revolutionary party is the decisive element in resolving the present crisis. The situation facing humanity is grave, but a powerful social force exists that can offer a way forward—the international working class. The revolutionary party is the mechanism through which the working class can act.

Events will pose this necessity for a revolutionary socialist party before the working class ever more clearly. Labour’s right-wing policies will not earn the government a moment’s relief from the complaints of big business and the banks. The clamour against Chancellor Reeves’s October budget—which offered nothing to the working class but continued austerity—goes on in business circles. Pressure on Britain’s bond market is preparing the way for a savage spending review in the spring. The demand now is for NATO countries to spend 3 and even 5 percent of GDP on the military, requiring tens of billions more pounds every year.

Starmer’s government will act as directed. It responded to the corporate criticism of the budget by quickly promising to ease even the minor restrictions imposed on the banks after 2008. Each step in this direction, however, will only stoke the demands of the super-rich and the fires of popular resentment yet higher; the Labour government had its political death warrant signed the moment it took office. The decisive question now is which social force will carry out the sentence: the capitalists or the working class.

Workers and young people wanting to fight for a socialist future should study and discuss “War, the class struggle and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party”. Pre-order a published copy today and get in touch to speak with a member about joining the SEP.



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