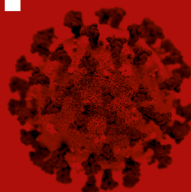


Capitalist crisis, coronavirus and (post) Corbynism Simon Hannah



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Capitalist crisis, coronavirus and (post) Corbynism

The Corbyn era is over. Now we face a twin crisis of a global pandemic and economic crisis.

Simon Hannah looks at what is coming down the road

Keir Starmer is the new leader of the Labour Party. With 52% of the vote he is in similar terrain to the support Jeremy Corbyn received in his first leadership bid in 2015, when he won on 59%. Already the result has split the party between those wearily hoping that Starmer will deliver better electoral results than Corbyn and those who have already taken to social media to publicly resign in outrage.

Clearly Starmer's victory represents a return to the centre ground for Labour, although it would be wrong to merely brand him a Blairite, which he is not. Nonetheless, the Corbyn era policies Starmer pledged to retain will have little practical bearing on future manifestos or parliamentary strategy as the crisis of capitalism begins to unfold; ultimately Labour exists to preserve and manage capitalism through constitutional means – this fundamental principle of Labourism will over-determine everything else.

Another nail in the coffin of this latest round of left reformism is the fact that Bernie Sanders is out of the running to be president in the USA. His insurgent campaign could not overcome the Democrat establishment and failed to reach beyond a (quite impressive) core supporter base.

We have to start from the reality of the situation. The Corbynite left has suffered a strategic defeat. That is a fact. So has the social democrat left in the USA. We can try and dress it up and talk it down or engage in a blame game (the Labour left's favourite pastime), but it remains true that the Corbyn era of 2015-20 was a distinct project of building a left(ish) social democratic party and winning power, and it failed. Who comes after Sanders or whether building a "socialist current" in the Democratic Party is even a good idea remain questions to be resolved on the US left.

There is now a debate over whether to engage in rearguard actions to salvage the gains made by the left within the Labour Party or to give up and move on to something else. One thing is clear: the prospect of a transformative left government connected to a wider social movement and capable of fighting a (limited) class struggle in government is finished. And with ten years until runaway climate change becomes inescapable, we need to ask whether we still have the energy it would now take to undo the defeat of 2019.

The crisis coming down the road

The looming economic crisis that has now been wrapped up with Covid-19 will have historic proportions. Neil Faulkner has already identified four intractable contradictions that are beginning to compound on each other as a systemic crisis – not one disaster but many that overlap and reinforce each other: the runaway climate change; mass unemployment and poverty as the economy collapses; permanent debt/financialisation/stagnation; and creeping fascism alongside global militarisation.

Consider this alongside David Harvey's 2014 book *Sixteen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. Capitalism is a series of contradictory processes, reinforced and protected by class institutions. Our relationship to each other, to work, to nature and the planet, even to ourselves are huge fault lines in a system that prioritises profit and private ownership of industry over human need. Covid-19 has exacerbated many of these contradictions.

The world economy was already facing its greatest slump since the Second World War; Covid-19 has put its foot on the accelerator. Economists now predict that German GDP will contract by 10% between April and June 2020. One in ten Americans is signing on as unemployed. That is worse than anything seen since 1929-32. The Marxist economist Michael Robert reports: "J P Morgan economists reckon that the pandemic could cost the world at least \$5.5 trillion in lost output over the next two years, greater than the annual output of Japan. And that would

be lost forever. That's almost 8% of GDP through the end of next year." The kind of social misery we will see on a global scale could be staggering.

The bosses hope that people will just slump into poverty and misery, surrendering to despair. Or take their anger out on each other, blaming foreigners or looking to conspiracy theories for explanations. Anything to divert anger away from the capitalists and politicians. There will also be a debate in the ranks of the powers that be over the future course. They could let the crisis rip for a few years and see what or who survives as capitalism reconfigures itself to this new reality. Alternatively, they might try to offset elements of the crisis by pumping money into the economy, bailing out businesses, even handing out money to ordinary people to stimulate demand. This second approach (Keynesianism) could only delay or slow the crisis – in their own way they would be hoping to flatten the curve of unemployment and deprivation. But the fundamental issue will be the system's profitability – if there is a collapse in profit, the bosses will see the Keynesian strategy as just pouring money away.

The bosses are already acting in their class interests: 15% wage cuts are being imposed on some workers, and the bosses collectively are openly discussing mass redundancies and wage cuts when the government payouts for furloughed workers stop. Already, one million people are in lockdown with no income, and 1.5 million are missing meals (here). The austerity offensive has begun. The ruling class will try to use the crisis to smash down a weak and vulnerable working class.

Legacy or baggage?

We also need an honest examination of the legacy of Corbynism. While many are arguing that Corbyn "won the argument" over austerity and helped pull the national dialogue to the left, we should be cautious even on that question. We have a vicious populist right wing government with a significant mandate; the degree to which they are committed to an anti-austerity course is going to be tested by the damage of the economic collapse after Covid-19 and the oncoming world recession.

In the Corbyn era, the left got too sucked into the standard routine of Labourism, into backstabbing manoeuvres for temporary advantage in committees, into an uncritical parliamentary politics, into the petty ambitions and opportunistic advancement of wannabe politicians. The political culture was also toxic, with a cultish devotion and naïve adoration of the party leader – reminiscent of how many Labour Party members behaved under Blair. The criticisms levelled by the New Left in 1968 against Labour and the Labour left turned out to be true. Of course, it was the right thing to be in Labour and have that fight, but let's not kid ourselves about the real world impact.

In addition, the left did not do much with what they won. The left swept the board in the London Region Committee, then sat on its hands as children's centres

were closed across the capital, despite motions being passed to organise a public campaign. The left took over Young Labour and organised the smallest London Young Labour conference in years. A clique from Momentum seized control of Labour Against Racism and Fascism and ran it into the ground. Looking back, there were so many missed opportunities.

The actual legacy of Corbynism won't be clear for a while. The danger with movements that happen in the bubble of the Labour left is that they usually stay there, rarely impacting on the wider world. One litmus test will be whether Labour for a Green New Deal evolves into some kind of living campaign that takes the fight to the government and bosses (and even some of the union leaders!), or whether it remains a policy forum that only wins motions at Labour Party conference.

Stay in and fight?

Since Starmer won there have been several responses from the left, which range from “stay in and fight, there is still a world to win” to “let's focus on extra-parliamentary politics”. Of course, in a period where the left is losing ground internationally and the far right are in the ascendancy, both approaches are valid, though not equally so. Moreover, in terms of investing time and effort in politics, people will need to decide whether attending another CLP meeting to pass a toothless motion is worthwhile.

Corbynism initially promised to be a social force that could rejuvenate working class resistance and social movements across the country (while hopefully winning power in Parliament), but it failed to do either. The idea that the Labour left will now become the nexus through which radical opposition movements operate seems highly unlikely.

Recent articles and announcements from *Tribune*, Momentum's National Coordination Group officers, and the newly launched Forward Momentum reveal that they are all focused on salvaging Momentum and making it better. They agree that there is a lack of internal democracy in Momentum. This is pretty easy to say after some of us have been banging that drum for three years. In all honesty, at this stage it seems improbable that Momentum can be reformed into a more democratic organisation.

These initiatives have not got to grips with the reasons for the Labour left's failure – apart from *Tribune* blaming an orientation on metropolitan students, and various people slating Labour for being too “pro-Remain”. Such shallow, trite, and incorrect arguments will get them nowhere and only waste valuable time. So the conclusion from the 2019 General Election defeat is either “Momentum needed to be more democratic” (to what end?) or Labour's NEC committed a strategic mistake at the 2019 party conference when it proposed (to rapturous acclaim) the second referendum position.

The leaked internal document exposing the vitriol of the Labour right and the

party machine between 2015-17 over the leftward direction, revealing the sheer level of hatred and rage directed at left wingers, should give people further pause for thought. One response is to say “shows you how close we got to winning”. But what it also shows is that the Broad Church of Labour involves contradictory politics and values operating in the same party: one church, many religions. It also shows that the Labour right would rather sabotage an election than allow a socialist like Corbyn to win. Is it truly possible to “reclaim” such a party?

Society in crisis

As the crisis begins to tear through society after Covid-19, the Labour Party will play its historic role of acting either in a unity government with the Tories (as its leaders did in the 1930s and again in the Second World War) or, at best, as a loyal opposition, proposing Keynesian measures to prop up the capitalist economy. At worst, Labour will support austerity and reactionary attacks on human rights and civil liberties. People who knew Keir Starmer back when he was a crusading lawyer will probably be shocked at what he is capable of, but in the final analysis he will act on behalf of the institutions he represents and the class power that organises the political and economic system. If he does not, he will be ousted and replaced by someone who will. The right wingers he has put in his cabinet as junior ministers, like Wes Streeting and Jess Phillips, are the second tier leadership in waiting if his soft left shadow cabinet becomes unreliable or he becomes unreliable.

Connected to the limits of Labourism is a fundamental issue that has been debated on the left for over two centuries – the nature of the state under capitalism. If the economy tanks and mass movements emerge that are pushing radical demands using radical methods, the police (and perhaps even the army) will be deployed against them. Labour has historically been very pro-police because they are an extension of the capitalist state and the Labour Party is a defender of the capitalist state. Let's not forget that Arthur Henderson (who reportedly applauded in Parliament when he heard that the Irish revolutionary James Connolly had been executed) and Fabian leader Sidney Webb founded Labour as a party in 1919 as explicitly anti-revolutionary – to counter the growth of Bolshevism in Britain. Labour is literally a counter-revolutionary party.

This is not to deny the mass working class support that Labour has or its role as a party of the trade unions. Labour exists in a contradictory space in politics between the aspirations and power of working people to change the world for the better and the political and sectional interests of the trade union bureaucracy and the parliamentary representatives of the party. The party is based on the consciousness and politics of this narrow strata of people; the idea of compromise, of conciliation, of using Parliament to secure a better deal within capitalism, just as trade union bosses try and secure more favourable terms and condi-

tions within capitalism for their members. This is all that Labour is, or can ever be. The working class is capable of so much more, but they are imbued with the consciousness of their mass organisations and the day-to-day “common sense” views of capitalism.

Common sense and good sense

The major barrier to socialism in Britain (and this is not unique to this country) is the air of defeat still lingering over the working class. And by working class I do not mean just anyone with a regional accent who might have done a manual job back in the 1980s, but people who are part of an organised movement, who belong to trade unions, or socialist organisations, or campaign groups, and who are active in political and economic struggles *as workers*. Partly as a result of the defeatism and weakness of our own movement, poisonous, reactionary ideas such as nationalism and imperialist nostalgia predominate in many places.

As such, a common response to the December 2019 defeat was to call for more “engagement” with the “working class”. But this is to misunderstand Labour’s problem. Labour has always been happy to reflect back to people what it thinks they want to hear, though this has always, in truth, had an ideological dimension. This is why it flip-flopped over Brexit; it was responding first to what it thought its voters wanted, and then the fact that it got nearly annihilated in the Euro elections in May 2019.

The problem Labour has is that it *cannot* have the difficult arguments and cannot shift public perceptions and consciousness in a concerted way. It is an electoral party that has to win votes, not a class struggle party of resistance. It is not set up to agitate for ideas or distribute propaganda for its views. Sure, it engages in mass canvassing at election time, but we all know that this is primarily a data gathering exercise to find out how people intend to vote.

And this is the tough nut to crack. We need to make socialism great again – make it popular. Corbynism helped reintroduce the possibility of a left social democracy, but we are going to need something more radical for the battles ahead. The lessons from history in relation to this are important. Whilst organisations that put out socialist literature and host socialist meetings can make a limited impact, people’s ideas only really shift in struggle. Capitalism is a system of antagonistic contradictions, which explode on occasion into a social, economic or political crisis (sometimes all at once). That is when radical ideas can take off, become popular and generalised. In short, you can turn good sense ideas into common sense ideas, as Gramsci said. So we have to be seeking to popularise ideas now, uninhibited by electoral considerations or how “policies” play in the Ipsos Mori polls.

And class politics is not reducible to the trade unions, though they obviously play a part. It is even less reducible to what trade union leaders want; officials

who enjoy their huge salaries and perks while their members have not had a decent pay rise in years.

Two different paths, two different goals

For the last four years in Labour I kept being reminded of Rosa Luxemburg's great criticism of Bernstein in *Reform or Revolution*: "That is why people who pronounce themselves in favour of the method of legislative reform *in place and in contradiction* to the conquest of political power and social revolution, do not really choose a more tranquil, calmer, and slower road to the *same* goal, but a *different* goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new society, they take a stand for surface modifications of the old society. If we follow the political conceptions of revisionism, we arrive at the same conclusion that is reached when we follow the economic theories of revisionism. Our program becomes not the realisation of *socialism*, but the reform of *capitalism*; not the suppression of the wage labour system but the diminution of exploitation, that is, the suppression of the abuses of capitalism instead of suppression of capitalism itself."

What we have seen in the last four years is a lot of decent people succumb to dire gradualist politics dressed up as radicalism. People who would have been excellent fighters against bureaucracy, social conservatism, and gradualism have ended up as bureaucrats advocating social conservatism and gradualism. They went into Labour to change it and they ended up being changed themselves.

The idea that parliamentary politics is a cesspit that destroys the radical left never crosses the minds of those within Labour now appraising this impasse. This is why we need a more fundamental and serious discussion about socialist politics in the next ten years – something that no one from within these milieus seems to want to initiate.

In beginning that discussion, we have to avoid a simplistic parliamentary versus extra-parliamentary dichotomy. We had extra-parliamentary struggles in 2010-15, including student riots and Occupy as well as significant housing campaigns: alone, they were insufficient. Struggles that arise out of the contradictions of capitalism, if they are to truly challenge the system, must move from social movements to political movements, they must develop from single issue campaigns to anti-systemic ones. This means politics in the sense of a wider argument about how society should be organised and by whom. In short, these movements did not fail because they lacked a parliamentary wing or influence in the Labour Party, but because they did not have a socialist strategy or the social weight to push the contradictions to their logical conclusion.

Of course, a clever Labour strategist will say, "hey we need to do both, one foot in, one foot out". Or they will point to being "in and against the state" as a model. But saying "do both" is too easy. What does it even mean when Labour is exclusively about winning power in Parliament (dogmatically fixated on that

one goal) and many people in Labour see extra-parliamentary campaigning as not only a waste of time but actively harmful to electoral chances?

Socialists need to decide how they think socialism will come about (or even more existentially, what *socialism* means to them). Do you get it through a left government passing laws? Do you get it from working class or popular uprisings outside the political establishment? Your answer to these questions will determine your view on the Labour Party or the trade union bureaucracies. Are they a politically conservative layer that holds working class struggle back, or are they comrades in This Great Movement of Ours (TiGMOO). Do you want a long march through the institutions, or new institutions, new organisations of resistance?

What we know for sure

Stepping back from theory, what can we see with our own eyes? There is growing evidence for a new mood of resistance. Health workers in particular, but essential frontline workers more generally, are angry – about the rundown of public services, the lack of equipment, the lies of the Tories, the risks they are forced to run, etc. Millions of others are already feeling another bite of austerity. People are beginning to question what work means, what it means to be essential, and why the bosses are prioritising profit over people's lives. More generally, there is a widespread questioning of neoliberalism and a growing sense that we cannot return to pre-crisis "normality". These red shoots inside the working class are in direct contradiction to the authoritarianism and austerity that the regime is already imposing and will ramp up dramatically in the period ahead.

The possibility is rising of explosive social confrontations as the crisis of the system develops. In that situation, revolutionary outbreaks and uprisings could occur in countries you would not expect. Certainly, radical mass movements could become common. Likewise, mass violent fascistic and nationalist movements could become more common.

How should socialists react to these events, and does Labourism even have a place in such a world? Can it go beyond its usual response, which is to just wish that all of these radical things weren't happening? Labour's response to the 1926 general strike, the miners' strike, the anti-poll tax movement – hell – even the pretty mild one day public sector strikes over pension reform in 2012, was to either wish they weren't happening or to actively oppose them. The Labour "hard" left historically has done better in delivering solidarity, but they increasingly had to do it outside the Labour Party because the party was a dead end for any practical solidarity.

And in the context of runaway climate change, we are going to need new tools and weapons with which to fight. Again, this is not say there won't still be a battle in the Labour Party over important issues, but it is unlikely given the scale of the hard left's defeat that the party will play an important role in these coming

struggles, just as Labour barely played any prominent role in the anti-austerity movement. It was left to individual Labour Party members to attend protests or join campaign groups; the party itself ended up supporting austerity. The caveat to this is that Labour is still a mass audience for socialist ideas and people will look to it to beat the Tories at the election, so completely walking away would be a mistake.

So what is the role of a group like **Mutiny**? In making big broad brushstroke class arguments against capitalism and for socialism (working class power and a democratically planned economy) in the face of climate death and economic catastrophe; campaigning and being involved in campaigns where possible; fighting the culture wars from the left, making clear the class angle; hating the Tories with every fibre of our being; working with other groups on the left around strategic goals, and pushing for greater unity and cooperation (the socialist left is tiny and weak so we need to be serious about working together to be stronger).

Mutiny needs to be a part of a healthy, non-sectarian socialist ecosystem of ideas and struggles. We need more theory and better theory, which has an impact on what we do as a left. It isn't a matter of what makes us different from other groups (sect logic), it is how we can positively contribute to the fight to get rid of capitalism. We must support each other, not tear people down. And be involved with Labour, but only over useful battles and causes. We need to engage with people who want to fight the bosses and the Tories, not focus on passive voters and what the latest opinion polls say. Perhaps most importantly, we need to talk about hope, and argue loud and clear that we can reclaim the future. Not just can, but *must*.

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