

The movement we need in Britain

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A bit of background

'We must give them reforms,' said Quintin Hogg, a Conservative MP, in 1943, 'or they will give us revolution' (Sagall, 2005). The Labour government which won the first election after the Second World War is credited with creating the NHS (National Health Service), nationalising core industry, and pushing the most left wing programme in British political history. This is what Labour supporters today point to when you ask them what a Corbyn revolution might look like, and it has certainly begun to gain traction among the British population.

What they forget is that the 1945 Conservative manifesto also included most of these benchmark Labour policies, which were not unique to Labour. Hogg reminds us that this social compromise was born out of the bosses' general need to compete with the then-powerful socialist movement for the loyalty of the working class.

The resulting pact froze class conflict in most core industries and confined it to the fringes of the working population. The unions became professional mediators rather than instigators of class conflict or social transformation, and were relegated to propping up progressive politics in parliament, a fundamentally disorienting change which dramatically deskilled the labour movement (Berlin, 2006).

This pact was short lived. The crushing of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in 1984, closely followed by the print workers' defeat in 1986, broke the spine of the union movement and, exacerbated by events such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent massive decline of trade union membership (among other things) meant that the compromise was no longer necessary.

In this context, the astonishing rise of Jeremy Corbyn raises existential questions. Nearly 13 million people voted for a democratic socialist programme in June, and Labour membership has continued to grow (Bright, 2017). To add to the optimism, the current Conservative government is only able to govern because of a fragile agreement with the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). The same scenario in 1974 resulted in a second election a few months later, leading to a Labour government. The 1974 parallel has doubtless informed the decisions of many people to join Labour, but this gamble alone isn't enough to save the left and sustain its revival.

The party or the union?

Trade union decline has actually accelerated since Corbyn became party leader (Topping, 2017). The rise of groups like Momentum, a grassroots campaigning network, has done nothing to shore up or

even slow this now-catastrophic collapse. Everything discussed in relation to a potential democratic socialist government and the policies it would hope to implement must be viewed in this context.

If Corbyn won a hypothetical second election, it is important to remember that his critics are not off the mark in pointing out that capital has immense power to influence or even block his policies. Bosses can, after all, downsize operations, offshore entire factories, fund oppositions, and move their taxes. They have not been shy to mention this in their own business press (Jolly, 2017). Capital flight is the bosses' strike, and it arms them with serious material power against which Corbyn would have little more than a democratic mandate.

Corbyn in power under this scenario would find himself needing a large, militant labour movement with the power to hit the capitalists where it hurts, at the point of production. The trade union movement is the contrapositive force to the bosses, the muscle that actually produces the left. The state itself is a result of class antagonisms and the moderator of interests in society, and the strength of the competing interests decides how far the pendulum swings at any given moment. This is why, when Roosevelt was presenting his New Deal to labour leaders, he famously declared: 'Go out and make me do it,' (Dreier, 2011) because he knew he needed the threat of serious class resistance to convince the bosses to compromise.

Momentum also fails to address this in a serious way. It is ultimately a body for meddling in the internal affairs of the Labour Party. It does not direct its membership to organise in the warehouses, supermarkets, coffee chains, high street shops or factory floors. Instead it mobilises people in their free time around politics they personally agree with. It is organising people around ideas rather than around bread and butter needs and that is a problem.

The other danger of a second election is simply that a Corbyn defeat would collapse the entire movement which has been built around him. The 'fix it for me' approach is likely the result of an entire generation being abandoned by the service unions who failed to instil in them a fighting ethic. The idea that better pay and conditions come from governments implementing nicer policies is unfortunate: the fact is that union density and collective bargaining are the only things which correlate to an increased share of wealth.

Even with Corbyn in opposition, a trade union movement could still get pay rises, stop hospital closures, combat cuts, increase maternity leave pay, stop redundancies, change the country for the better, and thereby weaken the opposition even further as the more pragmatic Conservatives battle with hard liners over whether to compromise with the movement.

New unionism

With the collapse of the post-war consensus, conditions of workers in the core industries have returned to almost pre-war conditions. The ILO refers to precarious work as 'non-standard', but actually formal employment with a contract was never more than an exception to the rule. The collapse of unions has not stopped workers fighting back, but without a class focus their resistance has sometimes become deeply irrational, causing them to hit out at other groups of workers or blame particular institutions like the EU for the failures of neo-liberal capitalism.

However, the same material conditions which gave rise to Corbyn, Sanders and Mélenchon (as well as Brexit, Trump, and Le Pen) are also the conditions for a revival of radical class-based unionism.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) for example, has sustained a staggering growth rate of 156% between 2012 and 2015, according to the UK Certification office. The Independent Workers Union of Great Britain had a 181% increase since it was founded, and the trajectories have been similar for the United Voices of the World and the Cleaners and Allied Independent Workers Union. A new community union called ACORN claims 20,000 members, from nothing just a few years ago.

These groups organise on the traditional fringes but are gaining traction even on terrain where it was previously difficult for unions to operate. It's not hard to see why: the established unions' slow response to the return to 'non-standard' employment patterns leaves workers with a material need for unions which are prepared to fight. Speaking of similar developments in his own time, Bertrand Russell claimed that 'Syndicalism' had done '... a great deal to revive the labour movement and to recall it to certain things of fundamental importance which it had been in danger of forgetting'.

The political independence of these new unions buffers them from the turmoil of Labour infighting and electoral defeats. Their focus on bread and butter issues allows them to organise larger groups of workers, building class consciousness. While absolutely marginal in their size and scale, more of what they are doing right should be incorporated into what Labour enthusiasts are doing wrong.

Their creativity has allowed them to organise in industries historically outside unions' reach, pushing the frontiers of union organising and building power in the gig economy, although they have failed in other areas, notably in their ability to scale up and organise on an industrial level.

A lot of hard work is being done by thousands of people who were previously unorganised. With all its limitations and defects, something important is happening. Community and workplace organising is messy, awkward, stressful, and dangerous. People can lose their jobs and homes. It is much harder than attending Corbyn rallies on a Sunday before getting ready to go to work and obey your boss.

But whether a left wing government comes to power in this cycle, or in ten or twenty years, will depend entirely on whether the energy generated around Corbyn overcomes its timidity and evolves into a movement of community and workplace organisers. Even if the Corbyn project fails in the short term, a new union movement can still play a key role in making Britain a fairer society. With collective bargaining coverage down to 29% and union density lower than 25%, there is everything to play for. We can get everything in the Labour manifesto and more - we just need to get organised.

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