

How Labour's right wing tried to fight back: An eye-witness report

Workers International draws our readers attention to this article by a leading Trade Unionist describing the ongoing struggles inside the British Labour Party. (Unite is the largest union in Britain and Ireland with 1.42 million members, a commitment to democratic structures and is a key player in the fight to build a workers party)

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United Left Chair Martin Mayer served as a UNITE delegate on Labour's NEC – and was there during the crucial period when Jeremy Corbyn's leadership came under sustained attack from Labour's Right. See his article recently published in Labour Briefing

FOR THOSE OF US ON THE LEFT of the Labour Party disillusioned by Tony Blair's neo-liberal economics, and frustrated by the timidity of Ed Miliband's attempt to shift the party back to the centre-left, Jeremy Corbyn's election as leader in autumn 2015 was little short of a revolution. We thought we had won the party back. It soon became apparent that winning the

leadership alone was not enough.

The most public show of opposition to Jeremy Corbyn's leadership came from within the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), where right wing MPs displayed extraordinary public disloyalty and openly plotted for his removal. What is less well known is how the official Labour Party machine – a structure created and nurtured under Tony Blair – became crucial to that resistance. The party's rejection of neo-liberalism under Jeremy was greeted with ridicule and indignation in Labour HQ at Southside on Victoria Street, presided over by general secretary Iain McNicol.

While it was difficult to attack Jeremy, an early strategy was to denigrate his vast new army of supporters, many of whom had flocked into the party. They were "Trots" and "infiltrators" who were taking over "our" Labour Party. Smearing his supporters as bullies and wreckers, and later using false charges of antisemitism, became dual strategies to undermine Jeremy's leadership. While Labour MPs voiced the public attacks, it was Labour HQ which organised and implemented what became Labour's witch-hunt.

During the 2015 leadership election, as Jeremy's support surged, right wing MPs spoke out against bullying, including online social media abuse, with the clear implication this was a brand new development and all attributable to Corbyn supporters.

There is no doubt there was some shocking abuse on social media. During that first leadership election in 2015, Labour HQ responded with unprecedented vigour to any complaint from right wing MPs. It was clear from the start that the same vigour did not apply to those insulting or attacking Jeremy or his supporters. Thousands of Labour Party members were automatically suspended and denied a vote in the election, without any real explanation or right of appeal. After the election, which Jeremy won with 60% of the vote, the vast

majority had their membership restored with no action taken, in many cases several months afterwards.

The attempted coup in June 2016 after Jeremy 'lost' the EU referendum saw an organised mass resignation from the shadow cabinet and all but some 40 or so Labour MPs signing a vote of no confidence in Jeremy. In July 2016 Angela Eagle announced she would stand against Jeremy and force a re-election for leader. However, forcing a new election was pointless if Jeremy was allowed to stand as he would surely win again.

Within days, Iain McNicol called an emergency Labour NEC with 24 hours' notice to set the election timetable. But the primary purpose was to secure an interpretation of the rule that the incumbent (Jeremy) should require even more nominations – 51 – to stand, a sure way to prevent him from standing again.

McNicol had resisted all legal advice except from his preferred choice of barrister, the only legal authority to back this interpretation of the rule.

The balance on Labour's NEC was finely balanced between Jeremy's supporters and opponents. Some of Jeremy's supporters, including myself, were away on holiday. With barely 24 hours' notice of the meeting, Unite flew me back from France. The meeting started with the most extraordinary claims from some NEC members of online abuse and demands for a secret ballot for their own protection. The NEC is a representative body and, as a union delegate, my vote is public and accountable, but we narrowly lost the vote on this proposal – a secret ballot it was to be.

After hours of gruelling debate we won the secret ballot by 18 votes to 14 to allow Jeremy to stand and not have to seek nominations. This decision was later challenged in the High Court which ruled in favour of our interpretation of the rule. The coup attempt had failed and Jeremy went on to win his

second leadership election in twelve months with an increased majority.

Angela Eagle faced hostility within her Wallasey CLP for her role in this. Claims of bullying behaviour and homophobic abuse at CLP meetings and vandalism of the CLP office were taken so seriously that Labour HQ suspended the CLP for almost a year and charges were brought against a number of members. In the event the vandalism allegation was disproved. Charges were eventually dropped against all but one individual and even he – a Unite member – was exonerated on the main charge of bullying behaviour.

We first saw organised smears of antisemitism at the Labour Young Members Conference, which narrowly elected Progress-supported Jasmine Beckett – by a one vote margin – against Unite’s James Elliott. Unite secured evidence of tweets from Jasmine’s campaign in which the allegations of antisemitism against James Elliott were actively encouraged. Unite also presented evidence of manipulation of the conference and ballot process by Labour officials.

These complaints were ignored by Labour HQ. Jasmine Beckett was confirmed as the elected NEC member, James Elliott was placed under formal investigation of antisemitism and Baroness Royall was appointed to investigate alleged institutional antisemitism within Oxford University Labour Club where James Elliott was a member. Royall failed to find antisemitism but did report that some Jewish Labour members of the club felt “uncomfortable” – presumably because of the club’s strong support for the Palestinian cause.

Many months later, James Elliott was exonerated of the charge. At the following NEC meeting I asked that he receive an apology which was denied. I later found out about social media posts attacking me for this.

Many of us on the left were bemused by the increasing

allegations. We had never witnessed antisemitism in the party and believed it to be the preserve of the extreme pro-Nazi and fascist right. It was not true that antisemitism was "rife" in our party, was it?

I read with interest an article by Asa Winstanley of the Electronic Intifada about the involvement of the Israeli Embassy and secret services in contact with right wing Labour MPs to maintain a stream of charges of antisemitism against Jeremy and his supporters. I circulated this article widely. Months later I was contacted by the Sunday Times for comment on an article they were intending to publish, attacking me for being antisemitic solely on the basis that I had circulated this article to which the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM) had objected.

Following a strong legal challenge by Unite, the paper toned down the article. Nevertheless, I did receive some abusive texts as a result, including one describing me as "Nazi scum".

The second leadership election in 2016 saw an astounding 6,000 members suspended following a scrutiny of social media posts on an unprecedented scale. The vast majority were no more than rude comments about Jeremy's opponents within the party by over-enthusiastic Corbyn supporters. Totally innocent people were caught in the net, including a Sheffield Labour branch officer who simply re-tweeted a Green Party tweet defending the NHS.

But abuse of Jeremy and his supporters went unchallenged. Peter Mandelson boasted that he tried to undermine Jeremy Corbyn every single day but no action was ever taken against him. Months later the vast majority were exonerated and had their membership restored. It seemed Labour HQ had resorted once again to a futile strategy to deny as many Corbyn supporters a vote as possible. The massive trawling and scrutiny operation carried out at Labour HQ in the end made no difference to Jeremy's 62.5% majority out of an electorate of

550,000.

Of those 6,000 members some 200 did face proper investigation and a small number of those were guilty of antisemitism. I was genuinely shocked to see some of the examples presented to the NEC. I had believed the existence of antisemitism in our party to be a fabrication. Antisemitism does exist in our party and we must not tolerate it, just as we must not tolerate any other form of racism. However, after the most extensive trawl in the party's history, the discovery of such small numbers out of 550,000 members proves that antisemitism is definitely not "rife."

Jeremy commissioned the Chakrabarti report which found no evidence of institutional or widespread antisemitism but made a number of practical proposals to deal with the issue. The second part of the comprehensive report made a number of recommendations about Labour's flawed disciplinary process. Chakrabarti criticised the lack of a right of appeal, the ease with which members can be suspended or even automatically excluded on flimsy evidence with no right of redress and the length of time people have to wait before a hearing. The recommendations of a fairer and swifter disciplinary process were stalled by Iain McNicol's office.

I have little doubt that the witch-hunt, including many false charges of antisemitism, is part of a wider strategy to undermine Jeremy's leadership, engineered by those who firmly believe he and his supporters have no right to be in control of 'their' party. Too many members have been left waiting too long for justice, smeared by unsubstantiated allegations without any opportunity given to refute them, and denied a right to take part in party activity.

The witch-hunt has claimed a number of victims such as Marc Wadsworth, a leading Labour black activist who was recently expelled, even though the original charge of antisemitism was found unproved. Jackie Walker, a leading left black Jewish

activist, is still waiting for a hearing date almost two years after her suspension.

McNicol's successor as general secretary, Jennie Formby, is fiercely loyal to Jeremy and the anti-austerity politics he represents. But be aware she has a mammoth task to change the culture in Labour's Southside. We discovered that winning the leadership of the party with Jeremy Corbyn did not mean we had won back control. So, too, changing the person at the top of Labour's HQ will not mean everything will be put right immediately. But it gives real hope that the witch-hunt will end and the party machinery will fight for, rather than against, our twice democratically elected leader.