

Citation: Stephan Kimmerle and Dave Hill (2020, 29 October): "Youth Driven by a Belief in Fairness". Reform and Revolution- a Marxist Caucus of the Democratic Socialists of America. Online at <https://reformandrevolution.org/2020/10/29/the-corbyn-movement-what-path-forward-for-the-left/>

"Youth Driven by a Belief in Fairness"

An Interview with Dave Hill, a revolutionary socialist in the Labour Party in the 1980s and again involved in Labour in the course of the Corbyn movement

Dave Hill lives in Brighton and is on the national organizing committee of the Labor Left Alliance. He is a revolutionary Marxist and a member of the Fourth International. He joined the Labour Party when he was 16 in 1961 and became a councillor on Brighton Borough Council, and then East Sussex County Council, as Leader of the Labour Councillors. He left the party in 2005 after "New Labour" under Blair supported the Iraq war and privatisations. He rejoined Labour in 2015 to support the Corbyn movement in its attempt to transform the party. In between, outside of Labour, Dave ran as a candidate for TUSC, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, in the 2010 and 2015 general elections in Brighton. He's been a lifelong trade union activist, including being a shop steward / union rep for a university for a decade, and worked as a professor at different universities in Chelmsford, London and Athens.

Could you first of all describe for us the situation when Corbyn was elected? On the one side, hundreds of thousands, mainly young people, flooded the Labour Party at that time. On the other side, their active participation in the party was somewhat limited. Would it be correct to speak about the surge into the Labor Party or/and Momentum as an "internet phenomenon"? Was it more of an internet-based, loose engagement, but with a lack of organizing and fighting?

That's not completely fair to say. When Corbyn first came in [as party leader], there was an influx of hundreds of thousands of new members. Labour became the biggest political party in Western Europe. There were very large Momentum meetings, full of young people- and a lot got organized in Momentum. Back in 2015, the situation was ripe, huge enthusiasm for Corbyn, and, especially, the left social democratic - for the UK, very radical - Labour Manifesto of 2017. Many of the new members were active on the doorsteps: We'd never seen so many turning up in their tens and in their hundreds during those parliamentary elections in 2015 and 2017.

Nowadays most youth have a basic anti-sexism, anti-racism, and environmental awareness, a strong belief in fairness. As Marx said in the Communist Manifesto, the most important job we have as communists is to develop class consciousness. That means to develop a class analysis of what is happening, what has happened and what should happen. In contrast, Momentum pretty much (though not entirely) restricted itself to electoralism and didn't do much political education as it should have done.

Since then, the mass of young people has dissipated, partly because of the influence of the media - for example, the BBC and Sky News. The mass media, since Corbyn's election as Labour Leader in 2015, were absolutely relentless- vicious, personalised, and, of course, right-wing, describing Corbyn and Momentum as 'loony left'. Momentum had some political education, but not enough. I do blame Jon Landsman and the leadership of Momentum for that. I think that was a huge mistake.

The mass enthusiasm didn't last until 2019.

From the outside, it looked like Momentum never dared to open its own structures for democracy, for new people, for new activists taking ownership. Is it fair to say that it looked like a top-down organization?

Yes, it is extremely fair to say that. In fact, Momentum is a private company owned by Jon Lansmann. It's not a democratic organization, far from it.

I am a member of Momentum. At one early stage, we were electing regional assemblies in Momentum, but nothing came of that. My group, the Labour Left Alliance together with independent Marxists and a huge number of left social democrats within the Labour Party really objected to the lack of democratic control of Momentum.

People felt no ownership. We got called to meetings, very good meetings. We had really big meetings and they were so successful in getting the votes out. But who organized the meetings? There was no democratic involvement.

And Momentum itself is very politically broad. Some of the people aren't socialists, some of them might even be Blairites. Had there been democratic structures, it might not have been a problem. We could have moved Momentum leftward.

A lot of Momentum members are putting their effort into very worthwhile social movements, like ACORN, which fights against evictions of tenants. They're doing some good work, but they're not interested in Labour Party meetings. Of course, it doesn't help that Labour Party meetings are often hugely bureaucratic.

There were recently elections for the national executive of Momentum and there were two big slates. One was called Forward Momentum; that was the radical one, and I voted for their candidates. The other one was called Momentum Renewal; they're 'centrists'. Forward Momentum won the elections and they are in the leadership now.

Do you have any hope that this could be a turn towards some more radical, more democratic politics?

I don't take this for gospel, but my understanding is yes. I don't put much effort and energy into Momentum at the minute, but I know there are many good comrades within Momentum.

Why did Corbyn lose?

One, the power of the national and international - in particular, the national - capitalist class and its ideological state apparatuses, to use a phrase from Louis Althusser.

The media was relentless. I had been a reader of the liberal left Guardian from the age of 16. I stopped reading it in 2015. Corbyn was such a threat that the Guardian became absolutely vicious in its demonization and hatred. But let's also not exaggerate the role of the media, because most young people don't ever pick up a newspaper. However, every street you walked along, there were the headlines, "Corbyn fails again."

Then there's the power of the capitalist class within the Labour Party. Not just the Blairites, but the social democrats who believe in capitalism. I mean left social democrats. Should I include Corbyn in this? Social democrats do not want to replace capitalism, but want to make it nicer, prettier, fairer. Not only was Corbyn weak in the face of opposition, but he didn't push for socialism.

Probably more important was the fact that, apart from about 20 or 30 Labour members of parliament, the Parliamentary Labour Party preferred to have a conservative government, or a coalition government, or a Blairite government instead, such was their hatred of Corbyn- and of socialism.

I can give another reason, which is the balance of class forces and the level of political consciousness of the working class, the state of the institutions and organizations of the working class. That plays an important role.

What I understand is that the Labour Party's credibility under Corbyn was undermined by the fact that local Labour councillors implemented the cuts that were handed down from the Tory government.

Absolutely. And one of the proudest things in my career is that I was a leader of the Labour group on the council of East Sussex in the mid 1980s and we were one of the last three councils to stick out for a deficit budget policy. In other words, to have a policy of carrying out no cuts whatsoever. The other two were Lambeth - led by Ted Knight, who died quite recently - and, of course, Liverpool, which was run by Militant (the predecessor of the Socialist Party [of England and Wales]), and led by Tony Mulhearn, who also, sadly, died recently. Those 'deficit budget' campaigns were for me, inspirational class politics. So, all those years ago I was called in as the leader of the Labour group by the solicitor for the council, warning me about this type of policy. And, to be honest, I thought, "f*** you, you're acting on behalf of the Tory council, I'm acting on behalf of the working class."

To bring it back to today: you are dead right. The lack of enthusiasm for Labour reflected in Labour losing votes, including in 2019 compared to 2017, is because so many Labour-run councils just carry out Tory policy. And it is horrendous; local councils in England and Wales have lost about 50 percent of their budgets. For example, we used to have youth clubs. Now, there are hardly any left. We used to have good libraries. Many libraries closed. The trouble is that so many Labour councillors - many of them for straight-up careerist reasons - are just carrying out the cuts. Others because they are 'law-abiding'. They should be organising and leading mass local and national demonstrations against the cuts.

When I ask people in Momentum about this, comrades say councillors did not have many alternatives. And when I ask them why they couldn't choose the Liverpool way, then comrades don't know what I'm talking about. Is there a broken history, some lost memory of working-class struggle?

Yes, we have to relearn things. The young have to learn the history of struggles, successes, failures. I mean, old fellows, like me, we've seen it in the sixties, the seventies, eighties. But there is that lack of historical knowledge and of course the media is not interested in discussing working-class history. I'm very happy with all those left groups in general, and their online and print presence, the Socialist, Socialist Worker, Weekly Worker, Socialist Resistance, International Viewpoint, that all of them have an impact. [online only: 4,000 characters:

I remember picking up, as a teenager, such readings. I remember at Tottenham Court Road tube station, picking up socialist literature. And having read this literature for 60 years - I'm 75 in a couple of months - I just acknowledge the debt I have.

Now I will offer comradely criticism two of the largest Marxist parties in England and Wales, the SP (Socialist Party) and the SWP, the Socialist Workers Party (not to be confused with the USA SWP), but then I'll say something in favor of them.

I am basically hugely anti sectarian. I'm against sectarianism. It is the reason why I joined Socialist Resistance, which is a tiny hundred strong organization, the Fourth International in England. Actually, I disagree with them on lots of issues- they're too reformist for me. But they have a Mandelite perspective, which means accepting and indeed encouraging minority perspectives within the organisation, and publicly. That's not always happening in practice, but for example, within the Fourth International (FI) I'm in the left opposition: I support- and I'm a member of- OKDE-Spartakos in Greece. They are the Fourth International in Greece and they're revolutionary socialists. I've marched with them, and the broader coalition they are part of- Antarsya- through the tear gas on Syntagma square in Athens. I've worked in Greece two or three times a year for the last decade. I was teaching there for a semester.

I'm hugely anti-sectarianism and anti-sectarian, which is why I have problems with the SP, the SWP; which is why I've much more in common with people like Paul Murphy and RISE, in Ireland. I think we have to work with other groups without seeking to dominate them, and my view of the SP and the SWP is that whenever they are involved in coalitions they try to do just that, to 'use' for their own party-building as a primary aim. I was in the United Left Alliance (ULA) in Ireland for a short time. I used to work in Ireland, in Limerick. I was an individual member of the United Left Alliance. In England, since 2000, I supported the Socialist Alliance, was in Respect, and then in the Trade Unionist and Socialists Coalition (TUSC). All of them foundered, collapsed, because of the internecine rivalry between the SWP and SP, as did the ULA in Ireland. The SP and the SWP, they're looking out for what's good for them rather than what's good for the bigger movement.

Now I want to say something in favour of the SWP and the SP. I criticize them all the time for their top down democratic centralism and their sectarianism. However, I've learned a lot in the last 20 years. I've worked with comrades in the SP, I've worked with comrades in the SWP. We've been knocking doors together. We've been on demonstrations together. They're fine comrades, really good class fighters. And so I have a lot of good friends and very good comrades in the SP and in the SWP.

I disagree with the parties' perspectives because I think that we need a United Front, in which different parties keep their own program, but are looking out for the main cause, rather than their own role in the main cause. I've got a lot in common with Socialist Alternative, the major split-off from the SP in my city.

From afar, it looked like the SWP and the SP as well as Counterfire commented on the Corbyn movement from the outside, but did not really engage and join the struggle. They did not join the Labour Party, they did not attend the meetings you were talking about. Is this a fair criticism?

They had a symbolic representation. They would send people to meetings. Like there'd be one or two of the leading members of the SWP in Brighton who would come to Momentum meetings. But they didn't send or encourage their membership in general.

Counterfire is very good and very effective indeed at a national level. For example, every day I get the Counterfire newsletter. They hold lively public events. They attract younger people of different ethnicities, and the events I've been to have been well attended, very dynamic. Whereas you can't say that so much about the SP or SWP. The SWP is probably more student based, whereas SP is much more trade union, worker based and focused, and more focused on the Labour Party. Between them in the UK they probably have around 4,000 activists.

Counterfire is a bit more dynamic. But they don't have meetings, just public events. I've sat down with a couple of their leaders and said, are you a party? And, there was no clear answer. They don't have members, but only supporters. Perhaps I'm speaking with a degree of ignorance here, but at least the SWP and the SP have branch meetings.

]

Corbyn and Momentum did not fight for mandatory reselection. This kept the Parliamentary Labour Party in the hands of the right wing without fundamentally challenging it. In a book that has been widely discussed within the DSA in the USA, Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin write:

For its part, Momentum's tactical caution to avoid being drawn into a media-fueled hysteria over the "reselection" of all sitting MPs, as had been the case with CLPD's reform effort in the 1970s, did not divert it from winning support among party branches and conference delegates for concrete proposals for "a democratic selection process for the twenty-first century," nor from getting many Momentum-backed candidates nominated at the parliamentary as well as the municipal council level.

So, they kind of agree with Momentum to not argue for mandatory reselection, given the experience of the 1970s from the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD). You were there and you saw the developments today. What's your take on this question of mandatory reselection?

A very interesting question, because I think CLPD and various left groups in the party, particularly Militant, took a much stronger attitude towards mandatory reselection in the 1970s and 80s. And there were some successes there, in the seventies. I agree with the analysis that you've just put forward and I criticize Momentum hugely. It was an absolutely huge mistake not to push for mandatory reselection, both for councillors and for members of parliament. There were some successes, some very left, socialist new MPs selected and elected in 2019- such as Zarah Sultana.

How did you experience those battles within the Labour Party in the 1970s?

I wasn't always a Marxist. In fact, I was a sort of left-wing Tribune-ite until about 1981/82. What changed me from being a Tribune-ite? I was always interested in Marxism. But what changed me from being a Tribune-ite to being a Marxist were two things.

The first was Thatcher. I thought, "if she can do that for her class, if she can act on behalf of her class, why can't the Labour Party act on behalf of my class?" Thatcher, the privatizations... it all started in 1979. I had grown up in some poverty, free school meals, council/ municipally provided vouchers for clothing- a lifelong awareness and hatred of economic and social inequalities.

The second thing that made me into a Marxist was my experience as the leader of a group of 19 Labour councillors, in East Sussex. Two of the councillors were Marxist, members of Militant, the precursor of the Socialist Party. And it pretty quickly became obvious to me that they were the two who had the most class-conscious, the most class-aware politics.

And so, reading Militant, the weekly newspaper, and Militant and other Marxist booklets ever since the sixties – and working with Militant comrades in the Council Chamber and on demonstrations-put together with Thatcher's unusually naked class politics- turned me into a Marxist.

If we look at the situation today, Len McClusky argues Keir Starmer was elected on a program of continuation of Corbynism and says that he "will hold him accountable to that." Jeremy Corbyn was asked in an interview with the Tribune podcast: "If you could make one request of Keir Starmer and guarantee that it would be met, what would it be?" Corbyn answered: "Make sure our party is always proud to be a socialist party." To me, those statements sound delusional. Am I being too sharp here?

When you gave me those two statements, I was going to use a traditional Anglo-Saxon word. Bollocks. I think Corbyn has recently come out a couple of times in criticism of Starmer, in particular over the leaked report about the activities of the Labour Party bureaucracy, with its sabotage of Corbyn particularly in the 2019 general elections

But those statements, I think they're ludicrous. It's ludicrous to imagine Starmer is ever going to lead towards socialism instead of against it. Since his election as Labour Leader he has repeatedly shown he is 'a safe pair of hands' for Capital, with the Labour Party once again, 'the reserve team of/ for the capitalist class'. The investigations, suspensions, expulsions of good socialist and Marxist comrades from the Labour Party under spurious, false grounds of supposed anti-semitism, is proceeding apace. I am absolutely amazed I have not yet been expelled, for example over my social media in support of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. A majority of my city's 10 strong local organising group of the Labour Left Alliance have been suspended or expelled from the Party.

What's the way forward? Mike Wayne wrote on Counterfire: "Here's a collective fantasy that a lot of people are having right now [...]: that Jeremy Corbyn leads a small phalanx of left-wing Labour MPs out of Labour and collaborates in the formation of a new party. This new party would very quickly attract a mass membership base of hundreds of thousands." That's nothing more than a dream, isn't it?

I do read Counterfire every day, and I agree with them on that. It's just a dream. A wonderful dream. But a delusion. There is a tiny possibility. A problem for the Left in Labour and the Left of Labour is that it's pretty crowded out there to the left of the Labour Party, with plenty of organizations who will be fighting each other.

That's why I'm for the time being in the Labour Left Alliance. We organize both inside and outside of Labour. We need to keep an orientation to Labour, because, at this time, and quite possibly, for a long time to come, that's where the bulk of the socialist members of the working class are at the minute. I think there's probably a hundred thousand people who have left the Labour Party since Corbyn's departure as Leader. I think another one or two hundred thousand will go. My analysis is that the Labour Party will go back to what it has been for nearly all its history, a party with the right-wing firmly in control. In two years' time, there might be none left. But, for now, we're trying to bring those inside the Labour Party and the socialists and communists outside together in a truly democratic organization. Internal party democracy and transparency is a major feature of the LLA. It should be for the Labour Party, too. So, us Marxists who are still inside the Labour Party fight for its internal party democracy, fight for Corbynite - left social democratic - policies but to move them to the left, as a 'transitional programme', but put emphasis and energy and activism in extra-parliamentary, non-electoralist work, in recruiting to socialism left social democrats inside the Labour Party and outside it, and developing class analysis and

consciousness. But Counterfire is right, it sure as hell ain't Starmer who is going to lead a socialist revolution. Or the Labour Party.

Interview by Stephan Kimmerle.