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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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16.01.2022

Corbyn and McDonnell combine to help manage the Johnson government's crisis

The crisis engulfing the Johnson government over revelations of parties held at Downing Street during national lockdowns worsens daily.

After Prime Minister Boris Johnson was forced to issue an apology in the House of Commons on Wednesday for attending a garden party in May 2020, to denunciations from his own MPs as well as across the opposition benches, news emerged Friday of another two gatherings on the eve of Prince Phillip's funeral. Downing Street issued an apology to the Queen for its insensitivity.

In these extraordinary circumstances, Jeremy Corbyn, still the acknowledged leader of the Labour "left", has been all but absent.



Boris Johnson, right, and Jeremy Corbyn, during his time as Labour leader, walk through the Commons Members Lobby in Parliament, London [Source: AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth, pool]

Watching the chaos unfold before him in parliament Wednesday, he did not rise to speak but searched desperately for a means of distracting from any real struggle against the Conservative government.

The result finally was a single pathetic tweet from the former Labour leader on the subject on Thursday: “The government breaks the rules—and not just over the lockdown parties. It unlawfully handed out PPE [personal protective equipment] contracts using a ‘VIP lane’ reserved for referrals from MPs, ministers and senior officials. We need a full independent investigation now.”

Even current Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer has repeatedly called for the prime minister’s resignation, as have several senior Tory MPs, including the Scottish Conservative leader Douglas Ross.

Johnson’s own future is on the line in a scandal which lays bare the contempt shown by the whole Tory Party towards those who have suffered in the pandemic. The crisis is fuelling massive anger in the working class, with millions wanting nothing more than to see the government fall. But Corbyn has contrived to sidestep these issues entirely with a call for an independent investigation so vague that he does not specify whether into the “partygate” scandal or the awarding of PPE contracts.

Corbyn and his numerous advisors are very aware that any serious summons to a fight against the Tory government, with a 79-seat majority in parliament, could be a rallying point for a mass mobilisation of the working class—an outcome to which they are deeply hostile. His statement was carefully calibrated to make an anti-Tory point which still turned down the heat by urging some form of parliamentary procedure stretching into the future.

Heading off the class struggle has been Corbyn’s fundamental role in politics, especially since becoming Labour leader in September 2015. He immediately promised a “kinder,

gentler politics”, without any personal rancour, a pledge to the ruling class that he would do nothing to upset the stability of British capitalism.

Within the Labour Party, this took the form of the constant appeasement of the Blairites, who dictated policy, tried to remove him and witch-hunted his supporters out of the party and then withdrew the party whip from Corbyn himself once he was replaced as party leader by Starmer.

The same courtesy was extended to the Tories. Corbyn’s opposition was always pitched around his superior guardianship of a supposed “common good”. At every moment of national crisis, any hint of opposition was dropped in favour of collaboration in the “national interest”.

In 2016, during the Brexit referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union, Corbyn abandoned his lifelong opposition to the EU to serve as a leader of the Remain campaign. When that failed and Theresa May’s Tory government was left wracked by crisis three years later, as it struggled to achieve the UK’s withdrawal, Corbyn stepped forward again as a model of bourgeois responsibility.

In April 2019, May offered the Labour leader talks on securing a Brexit agreement, appealing to Corbyn for “national unity to deliver the national interest.” Corbyn obliged within an hour, telling the press, “We recognise that she has made a move, I recognise my responsibility to represent the people that supported Labour in the last election and the people who didn’t support Labour but nevertheless want certainty and security for their own future, and that’s the basis on which we will meet her and we will have those discussions.”

He later offered himself up as the leader of a “caretaker government” to prevent a no-deal Brexit on behalf of British business.

Corbyn’s guiding principle was always to prevent the working class entering the political stage and taking advantage of the crisis in the ruling class caused by Brexit. The ultimate price paid by workers for Corbyn’s suppression of the class struggle was the coming to power of Johnson’s ferociously right-wing government in December 2019.

With the onset of the pandemic months later, Corbyn's conciliatory agenda was even more explicit. During his final parliamentary appearance as Labour leader, he told Johnson he did not want to be "relentlessly negative", and called on him to recognise that "in times of crisis... the wealthiest corporate chief executive officer depends on the outsourced worker cleaning their office", and preached, "the strength of a society that cares for each other and cares for all."

Laying down the line of de-facto coalition with the Tory government which Starmer would follow, Corbyn pledged to "support the government's public health efforts while being constructively critical where we feel it is necessary to improve the official response."

He said this knowing the murderous strategy the government intended to implement, having been present at government discussions on "herd immunity" together with his Shadow Health Secretary Jonathon Ashworth. The first time the working class heard of this was in an interview the then former Labour leader gave to *Tribune* magazine in August 2020. His silence had been maintained in the face of mass public anger when Johnson and his chief scientific advisers first made their "herd immunity" policy public that forced the government to declare the national lockdown from March 23 through to June 23 that year.

Corbyn's allies in the Parliamentary Labour Party have been true to his word ever since. It took the Socialist Campaign Group until May 2021 to accuse the government of "social murder" and call for "Those that have overseen this crisis [to] resign."

Naturally no fight was taken up for this demand. But now that the government confronts a serious crisis, the statement has been quietly forgotten. There is nothing to distinguish the group's members from Starmer's appeal either to Johnson "to do the decent thing and resign" or to the Tory Party to force him to do so.

The unswerving commitment of the Labour "left" to preserving the stability of British capitalism was confirmed Wednesday by former Shadow Chancellor and key Corbyn ally John McDonnell.

He told journalist Robert Peston’s news show, “in the interests of the country he [Johnson] should go. We’re in the middle of a crisis. You need a prime minister who people have confidence in”.

Complementing fellow guest Tory MP Caroline Nokes for having been “very honest and straightforward,” he advised, “I also say to Conservative colleagues as well that propping him up damages not just the Conservative Party, it damages politics overall. Once they lose trust in a prime minister, they start losing trust in the whole political process as well. So he damages not just the Tory Party, he damages politics in general.”

This is what Corbyn and McDonnell’s brand of politics represents. Not a concern for the working class, but for “politics overall”, “the whole political process” and “politics in general”. That is, safeguarding and preserving the mechanisms of capitalist rule—from parliament to the Labour Party and “colleagues” in the Tory Party—with the explicit aim of preventing the working class taking up a struggle for its own independent interests against the corporations, the super-rich and their political representatives.



The Houses of Parliament (WSWS Media)

McDonnell’s words have a clear international parallel. In the aftermath of Donald Trump’s attempt to overturn the US presidential election result through a fascist coup on January 6, 2021, backed by the bulk of the Republican Party, Democratic President Joe Biden has also repeatedly extended an olive branch to his “Republican colleagues”.

Like McDonnell, his intention is to prop up the broadly discredited political system in America, above all by preventing a genuine reckoning with the fascistic core of the

Republican Party by a mass movement in the working class. The result has been an ever-more aggressive lurch to the right among the Republicans, while the Biden administration pursues in all essentials the pandemic policy of his predecessor.

Likewise, the Labour lefts' determined efforts to shut down the class struggle have given the Tories free rein to pursue their policy of mass infection and social counter-revolution, always with the support of the Labour Party and even during the present leadership crisis.

In just the last week, the government passed legislation, with Labour's backing, capping spending on welfare payments and tax credits; and reduced the self-isolation period for those infected with COVID from seven to five days.

Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting responded to the self-isolation changes by asking why its implementation had taken so long and "how many days" had the NHS and the economy "lost" as a result.

The Tories' brutal offensive against the working class will continue, whether led by Johnson or not. And Labour will back them on all essentials every step of the way. A struggle against these partners-in-crime can only be waged in opposition to the Labour "left" and their attempts to chloroform and hog-tie the working class. A turn to class struggle, mobilising millions of workers through independent rank-and-file committees under a socialist leadership, is the only way forward. We call on workers and young people to take up this fight today by joining the Socialist Equality Party.

World Socialist 15.01.2022