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Britain's general election: A new stage in the class struggle

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Britain's snap general election delivered a major political blow to Prime Minister Theresa May's Conservative government. The outcome was the product of an outpouring of anti-Tory sentiment among millions of workers and youth and anger over the devastating consequences of endless austerity, the relentless decline in wages, cuts in welfare benefits and the destruction of essential social services.

This produced the surge in support for the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, which saw Labour's vote share increase by 10 percent and come within two percent of the Tories' 42 percent total. Among the younger generations, two thirds of those aged 18–24 voted Labour and more than half of those aged 25–34.

For the media, the result came as an enormous shock. To the extent that their universal predictions of a Tory landslide were not raw political propaganda, the outcome demonstrated just how far the well-heeled, cosseted, six-figure salaried commentariat are removed from the experiences and concerns of the broad mass of the population.

The election was another major indication of the ongoing political radicalisation of workers all over the world. Corbyn's gains show that had Bernie Sanders been the Democratic presidential candidate, he, not Donald Trump, would be in the White House.

There is, of course, a degree of satisfaction and even euphoria among workers and youth at May's humiliation. This is understandable, but what is needed in the aftermath of June 8 is sober analysis and a clear political perspective. After all, the Tories are still in power and, despite their political crisis, are working to create the necessary political shifts to impose their austerity agenda and plans for escalated warfare in Iraq and Syria.

The greatest political danger is to identify the radicalisation of the masses with its initial and undeserving political beneficiaries such as Corbyn and the Labour Party.

A lesson can be drawn from the warning made in 1967 by the Socialist Labour League, then the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), to the then-French section, the Internationalist Communist Organisation (OCI). The OCI was moving in a pronounced centrist direction, under conditions of the beginning of a major political shift in the working class that was soon to take on revolutionary dimensions.

The SLL cautioned the OCI:

There is always a danger at such a stage of development that a revolutionary party responds to the situation in the working class not in a revolutionary way, but by adaptation to the level of struggle to which the workers are restricted by their own experience under the old leaderships, i.e., to the inevitable initial confusion. Such revisions of the fight for the independent party and the Transitional Programme are usually dressed up in the disguise of getting closer to the working class, unity with all those in struggle, not posing ultimatums, abandoning dogmatism, etc.

The OCI ignored these warnings, broke with the ICFI and went on to play a critical role in building up the Socialist Party (PS) as the French capitalist class' main "left" party of government.

To those now inclined to accept the portrayal of Corbyn by the British Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party and other pseudo-left groups as the natural leader of the working class, we say: Remember Alexis Tsipras and Syriza.

The pseudo-left groups claim that Corbyn's victory has transformed the Labour Party. This is a lie.

Throughout the almost two years since he took leadership of the party, Corbyn has blocked any struggle to expel the right wing. Instead, he went into the election on a manifesto that incorporates all of the Blairites' essential demands—from support for NATO and Trident nuclear weapons to a commitment to "fiscal responsibility" and Britain's retention of membership of the European Single Market.

As a result, he now heads an expanded Parliamentary Labour Party drawn from the same fetid pool of coup plotters and saboteurs that sought his removal—and who will no doubt be included in his shadow cabinet.

Even as the election was proceeding, Corbyn was shifting ever further to the right. His response to the terrorist atrocities in Manchester and London was to abandon his earlier critique linking the terror threat to the UK's regime-change wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria and to instead chastise May for cutting police numbers and pledge extra funding for the army and secret services.

The process of politically molding Corbyn will only accelerate in the aftermath of the snap election.

Speculation is rife as to whether May's proposed working arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party will blow up in her face, whether she can survive at all, and how early a new election will have to be called. With May's "hard Brexit" strategy in ruins, no less than the *Financial Times* made a direct pitch to Corbyn, declaring that it "is surely time to press the pause button on a 'hard' Brexit," and calling for "cross-party support for the closest possible relationship with the EU..."

If it proves impossible to achieve these goals through the Tory Party, then a second general election may be held fairly quickly. There will already be discussions in ruling circles about whether Corbyn could provide the necessary mechanism for implementing such a major policy shift thanks to the popular support he enjoys.

The Labour Party has more than a century of experience in utilising the rhetoric of its "left wing" as a means of disciplining the working class and ensuring its subordination to the party and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy.

Today, some among the Blairites sense a new political opportunity to do the same with Corbyn. Before Thursday's result, the co-architect of New Labour, Peter Mandelson, said that he was working every day for Corbyn's removal. Now he declares that Corbyn has earned his right to lead the party, but will have to become more "ecumenical" and ditch policies that prevent the formation of the broader coalition urged by the *Financial Times*.

Corbyn, the apostle of party unity, will not offer much resistance and he will be supported by the pseudo-left groups. During the election, they all backed Corbyn and urged a vote for all Labour candidates, making a point of including the right wing. In the election's aftermath, the same position holds, with Left Unity urging "all those in the Labour Party—including the Parliamentary Labour Party—that have not previously supported Corbyn's leadership and policies to recognise the reality and get on board."

No line will not be crossed.

Should Corbyn begin the process of forming a coalition or a "confidence and supply" agreement with the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party and others, this too will be justified as the

“progressive alliance” needed to get Labour into office. This was prefigured in Greece, where the “left” endorsed Syriza’s coalition with the right-wing, anti-immigrant Independent Greeks right up to Syriza’s betrayal of the anti-austerity struggle.

The working class is moving to the left, towards revolution. However, its consciousness remains reformist. The task of the SEP is not to adapt to the existing level of consciousness, but to bring it into alignment with the revolutionary tasks made necessary by the escalating crisis of British and world capitalism.

This means opposing all efforts to subordinate the development of the class struggle to the parliamentary fortunes of the Labour Party.

What is needed is the development of an independent struggle by the working class against social inequality and war through the building of a new Marxist political leadership.