

An open letter to Plan-C

The world transformed or staying the same?

Anarchist Communist Group

2nd December 2017

This is a reply to the three texts World Transformed/the Labour Party and the Libertarian Left,/ Dreams, Memes, Labour and Us and Corbynism from (the great) below, written by members of Plan C. We felt we had to reply to these texts as part of the libertarian left, members of the Anarchist Federation, and one-time members of Big Flame.

We welcomed the appearance of Plan C when it first appeared and were pleased by its determination to develop a Plan C in response to the Plan B of social democracy and Labourism. Plan C seemed like a bright new star on the libertarian left. The “C” could be interpreted as either “Commons” or “Communism”.

Now however Plan C’s initial aims seem to be disoriented by the rise of Corbynism. Recently, three articles appeared on their website arguing for support for Corbyn and the Labour Party. Each article to a greater or lesser extent refers to the reactionary and counter-revolutionary nature of the Labour Party in the past but yet somehow things are completely different now. So the lessons of the history of the Labour Party are swept aside, as are those learnt from SYRIZA, who implemented the worst austerity programme in Greece’s history, and indeed previously PASOK, supported at the time of its election by the left, Lula’s Workers Party in Brazil, etc. The Trotskyists are renowned for their past slogans of Vote Labour Without Illusions, now Plan C seems to push aside even these qualifications and call for a Vote Labour full stop. There are a number of reasons why the analysis of the current Labour Party and the strategy arising from this analysis by a section of Plan C are both mistaken and detrimental to transforming the world.

1. Corbyn’s policies are not that radical and are becoming even less radical as a result of pressure from institutional political constraints.

After Corbyn’s election as leader of the Labour Party his close ally Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and Jon Trickett, the Shadow Communities and Local Government Secretary, sent a letter to all Labour councils demanding they abide by the law and impose austerity cuts set by the Conservative government “...the situation councils are now in is if they don’t set a budget, a council officer will do it for them. There is no choice for them anymore. As you know, councils must set a balanced budget under the Local Government Act 1992. If this does not happen, i.e. if a council fails to set a legal budget, then the council’s Section 151 Officer is required to issue the council with a notice under Section 114 of the 1988 Local Government Act. Councillors are then required to take all the necessary action in order to bring the budget back into balance.” No

indication here that Labour Councils could band together to pool general reserves and make use of prudential borrowing to set budgets that didn't involve cuts. That they could use prudential borrowing to build 100,000 council houses throughout Britain, and that they could tie this to inciting mass defiance of cuts.

Because of the Labour Party apparatus ruled by the Blairites, Corbyn had to shift his political positions, at least publicly. An opponent of immigration controls, at the last election he promised the most right-wing Labour policy on immigration in over 30 years. An opponent of NATO, he regarded it as a "danger to world peace" and socialists had to campaign against it. He has now embraced NATO, saying that "I want to work within NATO to achieve stability". A life-long opponent of the monarchy, Corbyn now states that the abolition of the monarchy "is not on my agenda." A critic of the police and its shoot-to-kill policy he once laid a wreath to victims of police violence at the Cenotaph. He now says that the police should use: "whatever force is necessary to protect and save life." Labour pledges to increase the number of police by 10,000 and the number of prison warders by 3,000 and border guards by 500.

How much more would Corbyn turn to the right if he were Prime Minister?

2. The Labour Party and Momentum are detracting from rather than contributing to building a social movement. They are using the movements to reinforce its electoral strategy.

We must not let the new social movements currently mobilising around housing, against austerity and against racism and police brutality, become tools of Labour. McDonnell in particular has as on several occasions hinted at such a scenario, talking of transforming "the party from the traditional centralised party into something more akin to a mass social movement, responding to the rising demand for greater activist engagement." By this he means co-option of the currently existing social movements as auxiliaries to the Labour electoral machine. More recently he affirmed that Labour is "changing into a social movement". But whilst Labour is able to organise mass triumphalist rallies it has failed to go beyond that, to massively engage its members in social action. Corbyn and McDonnell would like to capture the social movements for their own ends. It is up to those of us active in the social movements and in grassroots workplace struggles to develop a truly mass social movement, one that is autonomous and independent of political parties including Labour so that it can set its own objectives and aims. But instead of realising the potential of these new movements, of the rebel union phenomenon, (IWW, IWGB, CAIWU, SOLFED, UVW) of the housing struggles, the anti-fracking camps, etc. we are told by members of Plan C that: "Standing 'outside' of the movements influenced by Corbyn's ascension to the top of the LP really doesn't cut the mustard" and that "there is no other game that could build a mass movement at present." Momentum and Unite the Community branches "as external support networks of the Labour Party" are cited as able to provide support for strikers and their families, etc. However, there is no evidence that this is happening. In many areas Momentum groups are just chat shops, or at best inwardly focussed on reshaping the Labour Party not involved in social struggles. Our own experience of membership of a Unite the Community branch was negative, as when on several occasions we urged the branch to support actions of a private renters group and against gentrification we received no support whatsoever. We are aware that in some areas these groups have performed useful work, but our view is that in many other areas they are only chat shops or there to draw people into Labour or stunts for the Socialist Party, SWP or People's Assembly. In fact, the new enthusiasm for the Labour Party has drawn people away from involvement in grass roots campaigns and movements.

It is argued that a Corbyn-led Labour government would somehow galvanise social movements. However let's look at the example of Bennism in the early 1980s. Bennism was a similar movement to Corbynism. It mobilised around the left Labour figure of Tony Benn. In fact both Corbyn and McDonnell were minor figures within Bennism, as were some of their present associates. There was great hope that Benn would become deputy leader of the Labour Party until he was defeated by Denis Healey in 1983. In the process a large number of activists from the various social movements, women's groups, gay liberation groups etc. who up till then were existing outside the Labour Party, were now dragged into Labour and in the process these social movements were demobilised. A similar phenomenon happened alongside this when Ken Livingstone ran the Greater London Council from 1981 to 1986 and developed his 'rainbow coalition', involving the same social movements mentioned above, absorbing them into the GLC. The GLC funded many groups and organisations and often became dependent on this funding, unable to carry on when the funding was withdrawn. Again the result was demobilisation, with people looking towards the GLC administration rather than relying on their own action. Livingstone backed down against Thatcher on tube fares and setting local rates and there was no significant response on the streets.

Going back to SYRIZA, we saw a situation where it persuaded people to rely on its being in power and fighting against the austerity measures imposed by the EU, the IMF and the World Bank. Of course SYRIZA broke every one of their electoral promises. The SYRIZA member Stathis Kouvelakis had later to admit that the negotiation process with the EU "by itself triggered passivity and anxiety among the people and the most combative sectors of society, leading them to exhaustion". The Greek social movements have taken a long time to recover from the SYRIZA experience and that could be the same scenario with a Corbyn government. Again we repeat, we have to rely on our activities and our own organisation of grassroots struggles.

3. The cult of Corbyn: this is not libertarian!

As regards the assertion that the Corbyn cult is "precisely BECAUSE he isn't a charismatic leader", this is far removed from the real world. We are deeply disturbed by the messianic cult of Corbyn, and have personally witnessed vitriolic condemnation of even the slightest criticism of the Leader. This is not healthy and contributes nothing to the autonomy of social movements, and to deny the existence of this unhealthy cult is extremely dangerous. We will never achieve a libertarian communist society if people are taken in by the celebrity culture that pervades much of today's society. Even in our own movements, informal leaders are a problem and is something we need to constantly fight against.

As to the danger of media celebrities, let's take a look at the self-proclaimed "loudspeaker of the revolution" Daniel Cohn-Bendit, so eager to appear as a media celebrity during and after the May-June events in France in 1968. This brought unease and suspicion then among French libertarians, suspicion which proved to be well-founded as Cohn-Bendit subsequently became co-chair of the German Greens, and then advocated military intervention in the Balkans and a free-market liberalism. Or take another media celebrity, Russell Brand, who once called for revolution and a shunning of the ballot box in 2013, then made a U-turn calling for a vote for Miliband (Vote To Start Revolution!) and then his Love the Police outbursts. Or a more heavy-weight media celebrity like Paul Mason, one-time Trotskyist, who now tells us that: "The security services are our first line of defence and they need our support, as do the police and special forces" and who advocates the renewal of the Trident missile system, a permanent paramilitary police force, the ending of immigration for people earning under median wage, and the defence

of BAE, manufacturers of Typhoon bombers. Any criticism of celebrity culture is swept aside in the first contribution, despite many glaring examples of those who set themselves up to speak for movements, with no control from those said movements. Have we learnt nothing from texts like *Tyranny of Structurelessness*? Are we now supporting any media-hungry personality, who might say something vaguely radical at some point, and then inevitably renege on their previous positions? We don't need this, we need the development of alternative media created by and under the control of social movements. Novara Media is proving NOT to be this, with its increasing tacking towards Corbynism and its abandoning of previous radical positions, all under the guise of professing libertarian communism whilst continuing to shore up social democracy.

4. We can learn from history; the economic and political context are the same. There is no more scope for a 'left' leader to make any major changes within the current system of capitalism and the State than there was before.

For us, the key question in all of this is the autonomy of the social movements, as we have underlined above. If Labour is elected again, our belief is that we will see a scenario similar to that of the election of the Labour government led by Harold Wilson in 1964. Then quite substantial layers of young people who had been radicalised by CND and the Committee of 100 and by the examples of the civil rights movement in the USA and the struggle against apartheid, not to mention the burgeoning cultural movements, had an initial enthusiasm for the promised change from the Wilson government and were very soon bitterly disappointed. This led to an increasing radicalisation noticeably apparent from 1966 onwards. We should not discredit ourselves by dropping our criticisms of the Labour Party. It will be remembered later. Comrades in Plan C who still have doubts about the Labour Party should ponder on this and not be swept along by a euphoria that may well prove to be rash.

5. Lenin is not a libertarian.

Though only a small part of one of the statements, the reference to "Comrade Lenin" was disturbing. Since when was Lenin a comrade of the libertarian left? If Plan C is going to try and claim to be part of the libertarian left, then Leninism in all its forms must be rejected.

6. The experience of Big Flame

Since Big Flame was mentioned in one of the texts, it is worth looking at what happened to Big Flame and why. One of us joined Big Flame after leaving the SWP, and had not broken with Leninism, and the other was already a long-standing libertarian. Big Flame was in many ways like Plan C today (pluralist) with people with a variety of different views, including anarchists, Marxists, Leninists and autonomists, with a strong focus on the struggles of oppressed groups. However, in the end Big Flame fell apart. This was partly because the differing perspectives were fundamentally incompatible.

However, it was not only the libertarian/Leninist divide itself that contributed to the demise of Big Flame. An important contributing factor was the attitude towards the Labour Party, the GLC and reformism in general. Some Big Flame members got sucked into work with the GLC and others joined the Labour Party. It shows how easily it is to get demoralised when there is a Tory government in power and to look towards apparently easier options (eg electoral) than building a mass revolutionary movement.

So what to do? We must argue the case that the new grassroots groups and organisations emerging around housing and opposition to austerity must maintain that grassroots outlook and horizontal organisation and not be distracted by the Corbyn circus and its left cheerleaders. It's not a question of "in, against, and beyond" the Labour Party, as one Plan C statement suggests,

but realising that any real social movement that has as its goals the achievement of libertarian communism must be outside and against the Labour Party which has always been the enemy of real social change, has always been the social fire brigade when the fires of unrest flare up.

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