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Corbyn does not deserve our solidarity

Jon Bigger

October 31, 2020

When Jeremy Corbyn became leader of the Labour Party, a broad section of leftists saw an opportunity to shift British politics away from neoliberalism. Everyone from anarchists to trade unionists saw the opportunity and knew that the new leadership would need all the support they could get. They needed that support because they would surely be attacked from sections of the establishment, the media, and the right wing of the party itself.

This week, under the leadership of Kier Starmer, Corbyn has been suspended from the party. It's all the more astonishing when we consider that a year ago this week the 2019 general election campaign began. His suspension came when he downplayed a report by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission into the way the party handled complaints of antisemitism under his leadership.

His suspension has created an outcry by those on the left, some who still call themselves anarchists. As Labour slips into an uncivil war, it would be a mistake to provide Corbyn with solidarity. Instead we should look towards a radical future. The report is damning, not just regarding the way the party dealt with matters but

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it also cites direct and politically motivated interventions by the leader's office in handling antisemitic complaints. Corbyn downplayed the report findings, knowing that he had an army of people he could rely on to coalesce around him. His actions seem to be a cynical attempt to use that solidarity for his own political ends. He made no effort to apologise for the failings of the party under his leadership.

The report itself states that “our investigation has identified serious failings in leadership and an inadequate process for handling antisemitism complaints across the Labour Party, and we have identified multiple failures in the systems it uses to resolve them. We have concluded that there were unlawful acts of harassment and discrimination for which the Labour Party is responsible”. The only way that anyone can conclude that antisemitism is not a problem in the Labour Party is to conclude that they do not trust the report.

I spoke to someone who joined the party following the Corbyn leadership victory. They described the Party on the issue of antisemitism as “a cesspit.” They went on to explain that “all anyone needs to do is look at any comments section under Momentum posts about this.” This chimes with the report which cites structural issues with the way social media complaints were handled: “We found evidence of a significant number of complaints relating to antisemitism that were not investigated at all; this is especially true for complaints about social media activity where the Labour Party previously adopted a policy of not investigating mere ‘likes’ or reposts. Where matters were investigated, the guidance on appropriate sanctions was unclear and inconsistent.”

Crucially, the report found that the party was dealing with other forms of complaint in a much better fashion. “The Party has shown an ability to act decisively when it wants to, through the introduction of a bespoke process to deal with sexual harassment complaints,” it claims. It makes the point that “some improvements have been made to the process for dealing with antisemitism com-

plaints” but concludes that “antisemitism within the Labour Party could have been tackled more effectively if the leadership had chosen to do so”. The fact that they did not choose to, under Corbyn as the figurehead, should have resulted in people dropping their solidarity.

My source was extremely frustrated at the way people on the left have responded, highlighting that some are even “saying that anyone who disagrees with them are puppets, part of the Israel lobby etc etc,” which just underlines the scale of the problem. “It’s rife,” they told me. There is an assumption that “anyone who claims otherwise is either totally delusional or chooses to ignore it to suit their own agenda.” They described it as “disgusting either way.”

They also made clear that this problem is not “unique to Momentum. Left antisemitism has been a thing for nearly 200 years, with socialists, anarchists, revolutionaries and social democrats of all stripes guilty of it.” They went on to say that it is “just a shame that so called socialists would rather nail the flag to the mast of some old beardie who was useless on it rather than try and combat it. But, here we are.”

Those wishing to support Corbyn must address the report, not dismiss it. They must address the fact that the growth in membership during the Corbyn years included antisemites. They must address the fact that Corbyn has downplayed the issue. At the same time, they can still make the claim (and I think they are right to do so) that the media was against him. That other parts of the establishment were and are against him. That the right wing of the Labour Party were and are against him. Those things can still be true *and* the report be correct. Not addressing the failings achieves nothing.

Not addressing the failings teaches us nothing about what happens when we embrace a leadership hierarchy through political expediency, which is what many have been doing. It was a nice idea that the Labour Party could swing to the left and make politics nice and fluffy but it was always going to come with massive

trade-offs. We were right. We were right because hierarchy is, by its nature, a form of, and a reason for abuse. In national politics that means a far left coup within a left wing party is always going to require robust action to protect itself. In this case we witnessed a leadership not willing to deal with certain types of harassment and abuse effectively. We should ask why. If you are a Corbyn supporter you should demand to know the answers because the abuses happened with your support.

My feeling is that it may be because the extent was just too large. If it really was as rife as my source claims, then the extent just may have been too difficult to get to grips with. It may also be the case that in robustly defending their coup, the far left were just far too dismissive of complaints. They were being attacked from multiple sources and perhaps it was hard to know which complaints were genuine and which were not. I also feel, though, that the leadership may have known it had attracted conspiracy theorists of an antisemitic kind. It may have been reluctant to go too far in losing their continued support.

As always, anarchism is the answer. We should not hold back in saying we were right. Yesterday, *Freedom* published a piece encouraging anarchists not to be smug, instead looking inwards at how we have failed to build a mass movement. I agree, but standards and principles matter. Let the last few years be a lesson about principles, as much as it is a lesson in building a mass movement. The lesson from the Corbyn years, is surely that a mass movement combined with principles, is hard to sustain within a party hierarchy. Such endeavours will ultimately always fail us.