

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

A NEW CYCLE OF STRUGGLE

The British Left Post-Corbyn

Amardeep Singh Dhillon

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The 2019 election defeat of Corbyn's Labour Party marked the beginning of a new era for the British Left, as the fragile coalitions which had cohered around the hope of a social democratic Labour government shattered.



As the Left reoriented itself within Labour, trade unions and social movements, seismic events including the pandemic, increased state and police repression, and the so-called cost of living crisis presented challenges as well as opportunities for new modes of organisation.



With levels of industrial militancy not seen in a generation, and glimpses of new organisational infrastructures having developed, among others, around COP, Kill the Bill and the cost of living crisis, there is evidence of a proactive, collective reorientation of the left beyond the defeat of Corbynism.

INTRODUCTION

The 2019 election defeat of Corbyn's Labour Party marked the beginning of a new era for the British Left, as the fragile coalitions which had cohered around the hope of a social democratic Labour government shattered. The domestic political context has shifted at breakneck speed in the three years since – Covid-19, Keir Starmer's election as Labour leader, Brexit, the passing of increasingly authoritarian legislation by the Conservatives, the Cost of Living crisis, the death of the Queen, the expansion of detention and deportations of asylum seekers and in the past six months no less than three Conservative Prime Ministers in quick succession. The left has not been idle throughout the past three years, but the focal points of activity have shifted, new structures have emerged and while new opportunities have been presented by the emergent conjuncture, others have been foreclosed.

The following analysis will lay out the developing political context since the election defeat of 2019, exploring the concomitant shifts in focuses, power bases and institutions of the British left, as well as considering the implications of this analysis. The British left is dealt with through its three most distinct constituent parts – the Labour left, the Trade Union or labour movement and the movement left.

The Labour left broadly includes organised groups such as Momentum, Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD), Labour Assembly Against Austerity (LAAA) and the Labour Representation Committee (LRC); affiliated trade unions who fund the party; media projects including Tribune, Labour Hub, Labour Outlook, Labour Briefing; and Parliamentary factions including the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs (SCG), and the Love Socialism group. Open Labour and the Fabians could be considered as part of the so-called »soft left«, however their current alignments functionally situate them outside the scope of this report.

The trade union or labour movement comprises both the Trade Union Congress (TUC) affiliated unions and the smaller, so-called »base unions« that are unaffiliated to the TUC or the Labour Party. The extra-parliamentary or movement left is an umbrella term for a radical movement ecology comprising single-issue campaigns and various organisations, networks and direct action groups.

PRE-2019

Jeremy Corbyn's surprise election as Labour leader in 2015 presented radical social democracy as a political possibility in Britain for the first time in a generation. A new membership organisation within the Labour Party was founded to build support for Corbyn – Momentum – drawing inspiration from the grassroots organising bases of Syriza and Podemos. Momentum's stated aims were to win elections for Labour, create a socialist Labour government and help build a broader social movement.

Significant sections of the extra-parliamentary and movement left – primarily organising around austerity, housing, climate justice and migrants' rights – also swung in behind the new Labour leader. They tended towards either acknowledging the importance of building a mass political base for the left or the potential for a reformist, progressive government to mitigate the worst excesses of state violence many were resisting. Notably, many of those who now turned their attention to the party had come of age politically during the 2010 student protests triggered by the rise in university tuition fees.

A significant outlier in supporting Corbyn's Labour were environmental action group Extinction Rebellion, which would become the most significant part of the new climate justice movement ecology. XR began to make headlines in 2019 with its occupation of roads and highways, and its efficacy in terms of media impact quickly became undeniable.

Significant parts of the Labour left actively attempted to integrate movement struggle within the new institutions and campaigns developing in the Labour Party, such as the Labour Campaign for Free Movement and Labour for a Green New Deal. Much of the movement left responded by collaborating with left MPs and Shadow Cabinet members while putting resources into proposing, influencing and caucusing for conference policy motions (e.g. around climate justice and a Green New Deal).

Over one hundred thousand trade union members joined Labour, as members or registered supporters, following Corbyn's nomination in the Labour leadership race. The Corbyn years subsequently saw the TUC (Trades Union Congress) leaders dedicate more time and resources to influencing Labour policy – two-thirds of the 180 policy demands from unions in 2016 were incorporated into the 2017 manifesto in some form.¹

At the same time, 2017 saw the lowest number of workers on strike since records began according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).² Campaigns, rallies and disputes around higher pay and against zero-hours contracts – in line with the developing Labour policy to abolish zero-hours contracts – were ongoing, but on balance, it would be a mistake to characterise the Corbyn years as a high point of union activity on the shop floor. However, increases in union membership, among women in particular and concentrated primarily within highly-unionised public sector workplaces, contributed to a slowing of the rate of membership decline from 2017 onwards (there has been a trend towards a slow decline in membership since 1996, following the sharp declines from the Thatcher years to the Blair government).³

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/01cfa9c8-93e0-11e7-a9e6-11d2f0ebb7f0> (last accessed 29.12.2022).

² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/may/30/strikes-in-uk-fall-to-lowest-level-since-records-began-in-1893> (last accessed 29.12.2022).

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1077904/Trade_Union_Membership_UK_1995-2021_statistical_bulletin.pdf (last accessed 29.12.2022).

The so-called »base unions« – International Workers of Great Britain (IWGB), United Voices of the World (UVW), Cleaners and Allied Workers Union (CAIWU) – established between 2013 and 2016 saw a number of victories in militant worker organising pre-2019. Less well-resourced than TUC unions and unaffiliated with the Labour Party, their success in organising migrant workers became an often-referenced retort to long-standing tendencies in the labour movement that migrant workers bring down working conditions and pay for »British« workers.

During the Corbyn years, there were some significant developments in Labour-controlled local authorities. This included a renewed interest in community wealth building and municipal socialist strategies, partly driven by the success of the Preston Model, which preceded Corbyn's leadership by several years but garnered national attention during his tenure. On the other hand, the flagship Momentum council that took control in the London borough of Haringey in 2018 pressed ahead with the attempted gentrification of Latin Village, bringing it into bitter conflict with the Latin American traders and community who were resolved not to lose the most important Latinx community hub in the country.

While a huge organising drive saw several left MPs elected in 2017 and a few in 2019, there were also several instances of candidates being imposed on seats centrally by the National Executive Committee that were not well-received locally. While opposition to these manoeuvres in many Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) and branches was successfully routed by pro-Corbyn Labour members, a significant minority of local parties remained in the control of members who opposed the Corbyn leadership.

Between Corbyn's 2015 leadership bid and the 2017 General Election, Labour Party membership doubled to over half a million. The years between the shock surge of support for Labour in 2017 and the decisive election defeat of the 12.12.2019 saw Corbyn's Labour stripped of its insurgent image, with its confusing Brexit policy, equivocation on the question of Scottish independence, a hostile press atmosphere, internal divisions in the Parliamentary Party, and a manifesto perceived to be too ambitious and unrealistic. Since 2017, between 100,000 and 200,000 Party members have either left or been expelled from the Party.

2019-2020

It's not hyperbolic to observe that the British left was wholly and disastrously unprepared for the scale of the 2019 defeat and the speed with which the left ecologies cohered around Corbynism splintered. Bitter splits in the Labour left and elections within the affiliated unions were underlined by fatigue and malaise among the base, that in many cases saw the energy, previously channelled into Corbynism, re-directed to single-issue campaigns or extra-parliamentary organising (the movement left) or (mostly) simply fade into disengagement.

Within the party, following Corbyn's resignation as leader, the preferred candidates of the Labour left (including affiliated trade unions and Momentum) failed to win over the Party membership, and in April 2020 Sir Keir Starmer QC was elected leader of the Party with Angela Rayner as deputy. Starmer's election pledges had convinced enough previous Corbyn supporters that he represented a compromise between the radicalism of Corbynism and »electability«.

Abortive attempts to shore up pre-existing left networks before and after Starmer's election included Labour Transformed, the Labour Left Alliance (formed from the Labour Representation Committee and Labour Against the Witch Hunt) and Don't Leave, Organise. One of the more successful, targeted efforts came in the form of Forward Momentum – a new faction formed to wrest control of Momentum from the previous leadership who were perceived as having centralised power in the membership organisation. Forward Momentum ran open primaries and a campaign based on a commitment to democratise the organisation and defend the policy gains of the Corbyn era. They successfully defeated their main challenger, Momentum Renewal, for control of the National Co-ordinating Group (NCG) in June 2020. As Momentum – with tens of thousands of members – set about a refounding process aiming to galvanise its base through transparent routes of participation, it reiterated a belief in the Labour Party as a necessary site of socialist struggle that would be tested to its limit. Meanwhile, tensions between the previous and new Labour leadership culminated in the removal of the whip from Jeremy Corbyn in October 2020.

As the rival Momentum slates planned their respective NCG campaigns and the Corbynite base observed with dismay the renewed delegitimisation of radical politics in the mainstream media, Prime Minister Boris Johnson successfully passed his Brexit Withdrawal Agreement through Parliament in January 2020, that was soon overshadowed by the novel crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The arrival of Covid-19 in Britain saw thousands of mutual aid networks emerge in response to government inaction, attempting to plug the gaps left by over a decade of austerity through the development of hyperlocal crisis-response infrastructure. The activity of these groups included picking up prescriptions, delivering groceries, dog-walking and regular check-ins for isolated, vulnerable or elderly people, as well as the establishment of community hardship funds. While the make-up of these groups varied massively from Conservative councillors to local Momentum branches, the groups that inspired and co-ordinated much of this wave of activity were started by anarchist-leaning activists in London.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests erupted across Britain at the end of May 2020 and into the summer following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA. The re-emergence of BLM protests occurred in the context of Covid-19 lockdown rules that effectively suspended political demon-

strations.⁴ Previously, BLM protests had taken place in 2012, 2014 and 2016 with varying levels of police response, but in 2020 protests took place across a total of 260 towns and cities, (in some localities this was the first anti-racist demonstrations on record). The toppling of the statue of the slaver Edward Colston on 7.6.2020 and its dumping in the harbour in Bristol by BLM protestors was criticised by both Boris Johnson and Keir Starmer, but instantly became the image most closely associated with a revived British anti-racist tradition. The strength of public support for the toppling of the statue was reflected in the not-guilty verdict returned by jurors to the »Colston 4« who had been charged with criminal damage.

Hundreds of thousands joined protests that peaked in June, with police in London and Newcastle particularly forceful in their targeting of protestors and use of tear gas, horseback charges, spit hoods, kettling, assault, stop-and-search and dawn raids on suspected »rioters«.⁵ Home Secretary Priti Patel subsequently announced plans to fast-track prosecutions for those arrested during the protests, allowing them to be jailed within 24 hours and face a newly doubled maximum sentence of two years for vandalism or criminal damage. The overpolicing of Black-led protests is nothing new in Britain and during the pandemic went hand in hand with disproportionate targeting of Black and Asian men for suspected breaches of Covid legislation.

The BLM protests also drew the largest gathering of British fascists on the streets of London in several years, with over a thousand attacking a few hundred BLM protestors with fireworks, smoke bombs and bottles and clashing with the police. The rise of Covid-denial and anti-lockdown sentiment alongside virulent transphobia and nationalism would set the stage for increased incidents of far-right violence over the coming years. Nonetheless, the wave of public engagement generated by BLM was more significant and catalysed broader engagement with abolitionist politics among a minority of the British left. It should be stressed, however, that the actual emergence of resistance to the racism of the British state was in many cases spontaneous and emerged from working class young Black people who could not definitively be said to collectively identify with »the British left«.

2020 saw the tentative resurgence in trade union membership (since the dip in 2016) peak at 6.52 million members.⁶ Many workers, ineligible for furlough and left to the mercy of exploitative employers during the pandemic, reached out to the labour movement for the first time. The scale of need and lack of infrastructure to enforce legal rights saw

a hive of activity in the trade union movement that was focused on »firefighting« in the period of immediate crisis. This uptick in union activity would pave the way for a reorientation of power away from the rapidly eroding Labour left and towards the labour movement over the next two years.

Internal trade union elections increasingly became battlegrounds for the left in 2020, with Christine McAnea elected as General Secretary of UNISON (Britain's largest union) on a continuity ticket, while a united left slate called »Time for Real Change« won the most representatives in the Executive Committee and National Labour Link elections (the committee that governs Labour Party matters for the union). Such internal elections will remain competitive as rival factions seek to solidify power within unions.

These movements within unions took place in the context of an increasingly authoritarian Conservative government and an uninspiring Labour frontbench. Nevertheless, Starmer's removal of Rebecca Long-Bailey and Bell Ribeiro-Addy from the frontbench revealed the weakness of the Socialist Campaign Group of 34 MPs, whose lack of agreed strategy severely curtailed their ability to effectively resist their own marginalisation. The aftermath of the EHRC report into anti-semitism in the Labour Party and the removal of the whip from Jeremy Corbyn only cemented the apparent powerlessness of the Labour left. Members responded to Corbyn's suspension through the only real mechanisms available to them – by bringing motions opposing it to their CLPs. The Party responded by banning motions about Corbyn, and subsequently suspending hundreds of left CLP officers across the country ahead of the CLP Annual General Meetings. Over the next two years, swathes of socialist councillors would be blocked from restanding as Labour candidates ahead of local elections in 2021 and 2022, with new candidates not aligned to the Party's right wing similarly blocked from standing.

2021

The British left entered 2021 beleaguered and exhausted. The Labour left had been decisively marginalised within the Party, the unions had been desperately fighting to save the lives of their members for almost a year with little support in Parliament. Activists from the climate movement, mutual aid groups and BLM, the most active parts of the movement left in 2020, were burnt out and weary. Many of the bills being discussed in Parliament under Johnson's government would be passed into law largely unamended by the end of 2021, including the Counter-terrorism and Sentencing Act, the »Spycops« (Covert Human Intelligence Sources) Act and the Armed Forces Act. These pieces of legislation reinforced the relative immunity of agents of the British state to expand surveillance and commit violence in the »national interest«. Brexit and its disastrous economic consequences loomed large on the horizon. Public anger over the mishandling of the pandemic remained high, but no structures existed to channel this anger into action.

⁴ <https://netpol.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Britain-is-not-innocent-web-version.pdf> (last accessed 29.12.2022).

⁵ <https://www.chroniclive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/five-men-arrested-dawn-raids-18447512> (last accessed 29.12.2022).

⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1077904/Trade_Union_Membership_UK_1995-2021_statistical_bulletin.pdf (last accessed 29.12.2022).

The abduction and murder of Sarah Everard by off-duty police officer, Wayne Couzens, on 3.3.2021 sent shockwaves through Britain, sparking a national outcry with vigils planned by women's organisations across the country in response. Anger was further stoked in reaction to the use of lockdown regulations to designate many vigils as unlawful by the police. When feminist direct action group Sisters Uncut held a vigil at Clapham Common in defiance, linking Everard's death to the incoming Police Crime Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Bill, they were met with assault and arrests, sparking demonstrations nationwide to »Kill The Bill«.

On 21.3.2021, a Kill the Bill protest outside the police station in Bristol clashed with the police, with the police violence at the subsequently-named Bristol Uprising viewed by protestors as »revenge« for the toppling of the Colston statue the preceding year. The subsequent use of riot charges and sentences imposed on those arrested had not been used in Britain on such a scale for decades. Clashes between police and Kill the Bill protestors elsewhere remained common throughout 2021, though the slew of arrests and snatch-squads proved an effective deterrent to more combative street tactics.

Two separate coalitions cohered to co-ordinate dispersed networks of opposition to the PCSC Bill, but it would prove impossible for them to work together, and while the coalitions gave rise to new networks at local levels, the Bill passed through Parliament and the envisioned campaign of sustained civil disobedience broadly failed to emerge. A combination of burnout, a focus on urban centres and the chilling effect of arrests and prosecutions of protestors were the principle reasons for this.

While the movement left clashed with the police, the Labour left in Wales received a glowing vindication of its progressive platform when Welsh Labour won half of the 60 seats in the Welsh Senned in the May elections. Under Mark Drakeford's leadership, key parts of Welsh industry were brought into public ownership, more stringent measures were enforced during the pandemic and legislation was introduced to strengthen trade union rights – it led to an historic victory, and a co-operation agreement with Plaid Cymru on set policy issues, such as extending free school meals and making progress towards 2035 net zero targets. As Labour distanced itself from its 2019 manifesto, Drakeford's Welsh Party proved that left policies continued to be both popular and workable. Meanwhile in England, attempts at building alternatives to the Labour Party – the Breakthrough Party, the Northern Independence Party and the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition – failed to achieve success in local by-elections.

In August, Sharon Graham was elected as General Secretary of UNITE⁷ the Union, the first woman to ever hold the post. The former dominant faction within UNITE, the Unit-

ed Left, had split between three different candidates (with the official United Left group backing Steve Turner, a new group, Unite Unity Left, backing Howard Beckett, and another new grouping called »Workers Unite« backing Graham). Graham's campaign had promised to shift focus away from the Labour Party and towards the workplace. Since being elected she has boosted UNITE's leverage department and taken a step back within the Labour Party (UNITE cut Party funding and scaled back the union's whole political operation). In the 2010s previous General Secretary Len McCluskey had built a political machine within the Labour Party that aimed to select a number of left-leaning, and/or trade union friendly candidates. Graham's election marked a shift away from playing a leading role on the NEC, in internal selections, at the Trade Union Liaison Organisation, or in advocating for a left wing policy agenda within the party.

Another founding union of the Labour Party, the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU), was still less ambiguous about its disillusionment with Starmer's Labour. Following the expulsion of its President Ian Hodson from the Party, the union voted to disaffiliate from the Party at its national conference in September, stating it »would not be bullied by bosses or politicians« and would focus on channelling funds to organising efforts on the shop floor.

Meanwhile, the climate movement had been building up towards mass demonstrations at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November. While the results of the official UN summit were derided as insufficient by much of the climate movement, the activity around COP26 from the movement left did strengthen the links between different parts of the climate movement. The mobilisations in Glasgow and across the country around COP26 took over two years to build – there were 54 demonstrations totalling 250 000 people during the global day of action for COP26 and around 800 mobilisations worldwide. The networks built over this period aimed to centre progressive politics within a broad church of climate campaigns, and would re-cohere in 2022 at The World Transformed to take stock and move forward.

2022

2022 arrived with a new phrase for an old problem. The »Cost of Living Crisis« has quickly become the dominant framework through which to articulate the fall in »real« disposable income precipitated by wage stagnation, high inflation and the astronomical rise of household, infrastructural and business energy costs caused by the global surge in wholesale gas prices. What this materially means, however, is the expansion of precarity (in housing and employment) and poverty (often obscured as »food poverty« or »fuel poverty« specifically) to sections of the middle classes. Despite the sleight of hand the phrase executes, the Cost of Living Crisis narrative has had obvious utility for the left, leading discussion away from charity-orientated solutions and towards concrete economic and political de-

⁷ Britain's second largest union and the largest to back Jeremy Corbyn's leadership.

mands. It has inadvertently undercut the depoliticisation of poverty in mainstream discourse, and the movement and trade union left in particular have mobilised energetically in response.

While the campaigns that would emerge later in the year around the Cost of Living Crisis were still being carefully planned, networks solidified during the Kill The Bill coalition of the previous year were launching CopWatch groups across the country. Inspired by the community organising against police violence in the 1970s and 80s, and spurred on by the development of British abolitionism unfolding since BLM, local CopWatch groups would focus on normalising community intervention in policing. Their activities included training people to intervene in stop-and-search, holding vigils and protests, sharing information and supporting survivors of police violence, as well as educating people on their rights and on abolition as a political demand. As the PCSC Bill passed into law in April, the CopWatch network became the primary organised route through which policing would be resisted.

In February, a militant climate organisation called Just Stop Oil (an offshoot of XR) launched a set of demands, which included the halting of all new licensing and production of fossil fuels in Britain. They threatened sustained non-violent direct action targeting oil and gas infrastructure if their demands were ignored. The subsequent wave of blockades of oil facilities, sabotage of petrol pumps, disruptions of major events (including the BAFTAs and Formula 1 Grand Prix), »glue-ons« (whereby the activist glues themself to an artwork in a museum or gallery) and protests would see them targeted with conspiracy charges.

In April, Priti Patel's announcement of the controversial Rwanda Scheme, whereby undocumented migrants and asylum seekers would be deported to detention centres in Rwanda, kickstarted a new era of militancy for the migrant solidarity movement in Britain. The strength of feeling was reflected in a few high-profile instances of community resistance to immigration raids in London over the next few months. In June, activists from the newly formed Stop Deportations delayed coaches carrying asylum seekers to an intended Rwanda deportation flight – following the tireless work of lawyers, the flight was called off. A week later, arms company Elbit Systems was forced to close its London headquarters following six actions in as many weeks (from occupying buildings to defacing factories) by Palestine Action. Throughout, disruptive actions by groups like Just Stop Oil and Green New Deal Rising continued to make headlines, while antifascists clashed with transphobes and white supremacists on the streets with increasing frequency.

Meanwhile, as living standards fell and the planned energy price hike spelled disaster for millions of British households, the arrival of summer saw a huge wave of activity across other parts of the movement and trade union left. The emergence of mass non-payment campaign Don't Pay from parts of the movement left that had been active

pre-Corbyn, with a mission to gather a million pledges for a mass non-payment action should the government go ahead with its energy bill hike on 1.10.2022, presented a set of demands and actions alien to Westminster politics. Though it failed to reach a million pledges (it is currently gearing up for a renewed fight in 2023), the campaign was decisive in pressuring the government to row back on the planned energy hike and garnered significant public support for co-ordinated non-payment on a scale not seen since the Poll Tax Uprisings. Energy firm E.ON cited the campaign as an »existential threat« in a presentation shared with the Treasury.⁸

At the same time, the General Secretary of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) Mick Lynch became a household name through his deft handling of the media attempting to undermine threatened strike action from the unions. Over the course of the summer, British Airways workers at Heathrow, criminal barristers, postal workers, the Royal College of Nursing, the British Medical Association, teaching unions NEU and NASUWT and public sector union PCS would ballot their members for industrial action and take to the picket lines, giving rise to the wry coining of »Hot Strike Summer« by left media commentators. Although softened by the death of the Queen and the postponing of strike action in September, this militancy would quickly rear its head in time for December, which would see nurses on strike for the first time in British history.

Within weeks of the launch of Don't Pay's consumer strike campaign, sections of the labour movement cohered around a new workers' campaign, Enough is Enough, formed of community union ACORN, Tribune magazine, the Communication Workers Union, the RMT, Fans Supporting Foodbanks, the Right to Food Campaign, and Socialist Campaign Group MPs Ian Byrne and Zarah Sultana. With five demands – to slash energy bills, tax the rich, end food poverty, a real terms pay rise and provide decent homes for all – they would host mass rallies across the country and form local groups to support workers on picket lines, with hundreds of thousands signed up as organisers for the campaign. This mobilisation has powerfully redrawn the terms of discussion around the treatment of workers during the recession, though the next steps for Enough is Enough remain unclear.

The Momentum NCG elections in July saw a new faction, Momentum Organisers, narrowly take control of the organisation from Forward Momentum, on a platform promising to focus on organising within the Party and reducing work focused on the movement left. While the trade union movement was in ascendance within the broader left ecology, the Labour left was finding its councillor candidates barred from standing in local elections and socialist MPs like Apsana Begum, Sam Tarry and Zarah Sultana facing

⁸ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/eon-lobbying-beis-kwasi-kwarteng-tax-cuts-regulation/> (last accessed 29.12.2022).

deselection campaigns. By now, hundreds of thousands of members, many of them left wing members, had either left or been expelled from the party, weakening the Labour left's capacity to organise locally. Nevertheless, thousands of progressives once again travelled to Liverpool for *The World Transformed 2022* in September, where a broad section of the British left continued to develop networks and debate strategy.

Unprecedented poll spikes for Starmer over the course of Boris Johnson's resignation and Liz Truss' catastrophic budget and subsequent resignation made clear that a Labour government might be likely at the next election. While these poll spikes have stabilised since Rishi Sunak became Prime Minister, it's clear that Prime Minister Keir Starmer is at the very least a political possibility in the next few years. There is new potential here for the Labour left to exert pressure in an imagined minority government over specific policy issues, but simultaneously no guarantees that such pressure could successfully be brought to bear.

2023

Under Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party, the Labour left was ascendant in relation to both the trade union and movement left. It took on a central role in the wider movement ecology, determining to some extent the political horizons of the left as a whole and necessitating particular strategies in turn from those uneasily aligned with it. Following the election defeat of 2019 and the shock of the pandemic, the trade union movement has effectively replaced the Labour left, creating its own campaigns and institutions and rhetorically and financially de-centring the Labour Party in its own strategy. As university staff debate indefinite strike action and the government continues to play hardball with the RMT, the militancy of the workers' movement shows no signs of abating, and neither does its visibility.

Since the defeat of 2019, there have been moments in which both the trade union and movement left have worked in tandem with parts of the Labour left to seriously disrupt right-wing narratives, policy implementation and the news cycle. In these moments – such as around Kill the Bill, COP26 or the Cost of Living Crisis – there are glimpses of new organisational infrastructures in development with the potential to challenge the status quo. While not all of these have emerged resilient or effective, they do point towards an ongoing and accelerating collective effort to respond to the challenges of the current moment rather than simply mourn the defeat of Corbynism. The facilitation of new relationships between different elements of the trade union and social movements and Labour left remains vital. Since the collapse of a single, unifying umbrella for these parts of the progressive movement, the success of the strategies pursued by any of the three will rely on the support they can garner from the rest.

The possibility of a Starmer government raises challenges for this analysis. It is likely that the Labour left would tem-

porarily reassert itself as the primary force in the left were this to happen, but equally its actual leverage in a party of government remains untested since the Blair years. The trade union movement could be equally poised to cement its current status as the primary oppositional left force, but going on the assumption that trade union strategy under a Labour government would once again focus on lobbying around policy, it is possible that this could present the circumstances in which the movement left might finally cohere a structure capable of sustained civil disobedience. This could once again highlight the tensions between the red lines and strategies pursued by different parts of the left.

It's clear that whether or not a Starmer government is indeed on the horizon, the focal points of sustained, progressive organising in the next few years are unlikely to be reliably located within the Labour left, although it will play a vital role in pushing left policy in government or opposition. The links between the labour movement and the extra-parliamentary movement left will need to be developed through new and existing organisational structures and campaigns irrespective of who wins the next election – the Overton window has shifted further rightwards since the defeat of 2019, and it will take a huge collective effort to push back against the prevailing electoral political currents in the next few years. The British left has finally shaken off the long shadow of Corbynism and its defeat: now, it must strengthen its dynamic movement ecology to be capable of strategically responding to the political uncertainty ahead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amardeep Singh Dhillon is Programme Co-ordinator at The World Transformed, a co-editor at Red Pepper magazine and a freelance journalist.

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Left organising since the demise of Corbynism has diversified and responded to the myriad challenges that arose within the context of the cost of living crisis, the pandemic, heightened state and police repression and a hostile atmosphere for the left within the Labour party itself. Social movements, such as Black Lives Matter, Kill the Bill, and environmental justice campaigns became more central sites of left activity, as did trade unions.



It's clear that whether or not a Starmer government is indeed on the horizon, the focal points of sustained, progressive organising in the next few years are unlikely to be reliably located within the Labour left, although it will play a vital role in pushing left policy in government or opposition. The links between the labour movement and the extra-parliamentary movement left will need to be developed through new and existing organisational structures and campaigns irrespective of who wins the next election.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

<https://uk.fes.de>