

# Britain: Is the Labour Party dead for the Left?

Monday 24 October 2022, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 24 October 2022).

**Dave Kellaway refutes some of the left's ideas that calling a general election or voting Labour plays into the hands of a Tory-lite Starmer and undermines the developing strike wave.**

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“Labour is dead for socialists”,

“Starmer has completely killed off the hopes of Corbyn and it is a waste of time bothering about Labour anymore”

“We should launch a new party to the left of Labour - let's base it on **Enough is Enough** or get Jeremy to lead it”

“Look Chris Williamson and Scargill are coming together to build a new party”

“Calling for a general election is just electoralist and demobilises the various strike struggles”

All these comments and similar can be found ping-ponging around on social media. Even platforms like Crispin Flintoff's, Not the Andrew Marr show, which brings together hundreds of activists, have broadcast these views. Undoubtedly, they are a response to the vicious, systematic witch hunt against the Left in Labour. Newly elected NEC member Naomi Wimbourne-Idressi was suspended. Member for Parliament Sam Tarry, who defied Starmer's ban on frontbenchers supporting railworkers, has been deselected. Emma Coad was eliminated from the long list in Kensington and Chelsea. Local constituency leaders' choices were trampled on in Sedgefield... The list could fill this page.

At the same time, the Labour leadership has made it clear that it will not even put some key progressive policies, passed by conference, into the manifesto. For example, bringing the utilities into common ownership or introducing Proportional Representation. The mantra today from Starmer and Reeves is that Labour will not be able to do the “good things” it would like to do as quickly as it would like because of the economic mess the Tories will leave.

## Despair

The cries of despair about the direction of Labour today are more understandable if we consider how

huge the illusions and hopes were in Jeremy Corbyn's project. Many of the people who flocked to the Labour party when Corbyn won the leadership did not have long-term political experience. As Michael Chessum recently pointed out in his book *This is Only the Beginning*, there was a significant gap between this generation and the new left of the 1970s, with its more Marxist, anti-imperialist background and links to newly radicalised worker militants. Some of the new activists were even conned by Starmer's leadership campaign, which promised continuity with the 2017 manifesto and party unity (the notorious ten pledges). Consequently, when the Labour leader's true colours were clearly exposed, the depth of disappointment was as great as the earlier illusions. Hence the angry adoption of notions that Labour is just the same as the Tories or that you have to straightaway organise a new party.

That 70s generation, whether they were involved as members of the Labour party or not, was schooled in the historical evidence that Labour is not anti-capitalist and has not ever argued or organised for a break with capital and its imperialist state. From its very foundation, Labour stood apart and against the revolutionary traditions of Lenin and Luxembourg, who refused to support their own ruling class in the massacre of workers during the First World War. Even the most progressive Labour government, after 1945, with Atlee, while bringing in substantial social reforms, essentially helped rebuild conditions for a new post-war capitalist boom that did not fundamentally redistribute a great deal to working people.

## **Socialist alternative**

So yes, if we are talking about Labour as a vehicle or tool of a socialist alternative, then it is dead for the left, but this is part of its DNA, its original make-up. For this reason, whether socialists work inside or outside the Labour party, they should always be preparing for the strategic need for a different sort of party that can really break with a system that exploits working people and is destroying the planet. There are some inside the Momentum project who are worried that it does not go far enough in preparing for the possibility of a split in the Labour Party and the subsequent foundation of a new party.

While it might be dead in this sense for consistent socialists, it is certainly not dead for the working class as a whole. Working people still vote Labour in far greater numbers than they vote Tory. The key defensive organisations of the working class, the trade unions, at 6 million strong, are still mostly affiliated to the Labour Party. This means, particularly in times of rising strike struggles, their voice is heard and can have an impact on the party and its MPs. It is reported that Labour has recruited 20,000 new members and received increased donations since its conference a few weeks ago. True, the remorseless attacks on the left have meant a loss of maybe 150,000 or more members since 2019, but in the absence of a credible left alternative, it will still attract working people who are desperate to see the end of this disastrous Tory cabal.

## **Strategy**

Understanding the strategic need for a different sort of party to change society does not mean you can just proclaim one and it will emerge. What makes it so much more difficult here is the anti-democratic first past the post electoral system. Incidentally that is why the socialist left should vigorously campaign in support of Proportional Representation. Ideally you need some split or significant disaffection by Labour left MPs and some trade unions to have a realistic chance of building an alternative. It is not impossible to win people away from Labourism even without such splits or any PR system - we have seen this with the Green Party and with the Respect experience where MPs were won to the left of Labour. If Corbyn were to stand against Labour in Islington North he would have a realistic chance of holding the seat. These experiences show that a left of labour current could win support, there is not an innate historical necessity for working people to forever

support Labour.

In current conditions, it looks very unlikely that there will be a left-of-labour alternative at the next General Election. In a vote between the Conservatives and the Labour Party, socialists shouldn't sit it out. Those of us on the left who advocate, realistically, a vote for Labour have been labelled as supporters of "lesser evilism" by some of the sectarians. Well, if it is less evil to vote for a government that will repeal the proposed new Tory anti-union legislation or bring in a fossil-free energy system by 2030, then as socialists we plead guilty. There are policy differences between Tory and Labour governments that we have to recognise and defend. Working people will not listen to the left if we ignore reality. For a railworker, it will make a difference if a minimum service guarantee is brought in or not. It will make a difference to our health and the environment if the zero carbon pledge is implemented or not.

Of course, we know such progressive policies do not go far enough, but we can start from there rather than have to fight much worse Tory policies. We can mobilise the labour movement to force a Labour government to take more radical measures.

## Radical outcomes

The best way of creating the conditions for achieving more radical outcomes is the way in which the Tory government falls. It is more important to build support and solidarity for the strike wave than to pass some radical motions inside Labour that will be ignored by the leadership. If the Tory government collapses because "normal society" is no longer functioning due to strike struggles and mass campaigning, then an incoming Labour government will find it more difficult to directly hold back pro-working class measures. As Mick Lynch and others have said, the movement has to hold any Labour government to account. Clearly, the Labour leadership is keen for the transition to be as parliamentary as possible. Starmer has still never openly supported any of the strikers' demands.

All the left currents should collaborate in building solidarity - such as for the **Peoples' Assembly November 5<sup>th</sup> national demo**, which has broad support, or in developing the Enough is Enough campaign. At the same time, we need to debate the sort of demands that can build on any progressive policies Labour puts forward. We are firmly against limiting the changes we need because of the need to maintain an arbitrarily level of state borrowing or submit tamely to the dictates of 'godlike' market forces. Solid measures that show where we get the money from to pay for redistributive policies need to be adopted. Wealth taxes, including on assets, and further windfall taxes, not just on energy companies, are two ways we can show we mean business. A progressive reform of the council tax—still based on 1991 values—could release considerable sums. We disagree with the Labour leadership's obsessive reluctance to mention raising taxes.

The answer to whether Labour is dead is really both yes and no - depending on what you mean and who you are referring to, whether it is socialists or working people as a whole. Socialists always need to place themselves one step ahead of the movement as a whole. Submerging ourselves and keeping our heads down is just as ineffective as charging head first without any connection to the level of consciousness in society. So, proclaiming that Labour is dead and no longer worth voting for is doing precisely that. It is wishful thinking. The conversation about Labour's strategic demise is related but has a different target audience.

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**P.S.**

- Anti\*Capitalist Resistance. 24 Oct 2022:

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/is-the-labour-party-dead-for-the-left/>

- Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti\*Capitalist Resistance, a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.

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