Motion 2: Socialist Students, Labour and the local elections

1. The election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party came as a result of huge hunger for an alternative to the politics of austerity and enthusiasm for socialist policies. Younger people were particularly prominent in the ‘Corbyn surge’, and we played a very important part in striking a major blow against the government in June’s general election. Corbyn’s policies – free education, £10 an hour, nationalisation and house building – were what motivated us to turn out in such numbers.
2. In the run up to the election, Socialist Students took part in a large amount of campaigning. We adopted the slogan ‘Tories out – Corbyn in’. We advocated for a Corbyn-led, anti-austerity government, while fighting for socialist policies and building pressure for Corbyn to stick-to and go further than the pledges outlined in Labour’s manifesto - including on questions like the writing-off of student debt.
3. The election result dealt an enormous blow to the government. But, backed by the DUP’s leadership, the Tories are currently limping on. Nonetheless, they remain extremely weak. If they faced a mass movement, they could rapidly be toppled and forced to call an election.
4. This is one important aspect of the background to the upcoming local elections which will take place in June. But these will not be elections which offer a choice between Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn. Indeed, the anti-austerity politics which proved so attractive in the general election will not be what is offered by the majority of Labour candidates in May.
5. This is because, despite having won two leadership elections, and seeing the Labour vote increase by a large margin in the general election, Corbyn remains at the head of what is really ‘two parties in one’. On the one hand, there are the hundreds of thousands of young and working class people who joined Labour to support Corbyn’s anti austerity policies. On the other, there is the right-wing, Blairite rump which continues to dominate the Labour party in parliament and local government - as well as in the organisation’s apparatus and machinery.
6. Despite the fake ‘conversions’ of some right-wingers in the immediate aftermath of the general election, since June, Corbyn has continued to face attempts to undermine his leadership. In particular, with their immediate aim of ousting him pushed back, the Blairites have focused on attempting to ‘hem in’ Corbyn, restricting his ability to put forward his policies, and seeking to force retreats on important political questions. These have included Labour’s attitude to the EU negotiations, the question of party democracy, and the role of Labour councils under Tory austerity. Unfortunately, when faced with such pressure Corbyn and McDonnell have, all too often, taken the path of retreat.
7. It is in local government where the ‘two parties’ can perhaps be seen most starkly. While Corbyn and McDonnell have said explicitly that Labour is now an anti-austerity party, Labour councils are this year preparing to make up to £2 billion in cuts. According to the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, which has conducted a survey, there is more than half a billion in planned cuts across just 21 Labour councils. This comes on top of more than seven years of Labour councillors dutifully implementing Tory austerity, with devastating consequences for local communities.
8. These cuts are not a matter of abstract numbers on a spreadsheet. They represent closed libraries, lost jobs, youth services abolished, social care plunged into crisis. But councillors have a choice. If Labour is to be an anti-austerity party, as Corbyn has argued it should, this needs to apply at all levels - in deeds, not just words. Where the Labour Party is in power in local councils, there exists an opportunity to put Corbynism into practice in the here and now.
9. Councillors can act as a defence against Tory cuts, or they can be May's little helpers. If they were prepared to use their reserves and borrowing powers, they could stop the cuts onslaught, while building a mass movement that could force the Tories to call an election. Corbyn should pledge now that he would support any council that does this.
10. If Labour councils around the country collectively declared that they would not be prepared to implement cuts it would have a tremendous effect. In fact, even if only one council did so, it could act as a lightning conductor for the seething discontent within society. With our weak government perched the edge of a cliff – it’s clear that if they faced opposition from local councils, backed up by a mass movement, they could rapidly be pushed off!
11. In Birmingham, the brutality of local government cuts was recently highlighted as the city’s Labour council threatened to sack its bin workers unless they accepted a staggering £5,000 a year pay cut. Socialist Students members were proud to take part in picket lines and stand alongside these workers during their (ultimately victorious) strike action.
12. In Haringey, the Labour council’s plan to sell-off its homes and land to a private developer, without giving guarantees that existing tenants would be able to return on the same terms, generated a groundswell of opposition. The project, known as the Haringey Development Vehicle (HDV), was widely understood to be a scheme aimed at accelerating the process of gentrification sweeping the borough by paving the way for working class residents to be forced from their homes.
13. Haringey council is not an extreme outlier. Particularly across London, similar schemes are springing up. For example, there are planned ‘monster block’ developments - where luxury flats will be built on council property and offered for private sale - in Waltham Forest, Greenwich and Hackney – all of which are Labour-run local authorities.
14. The anti-gentrification campaign that has developed to oppose HDV in Haringey has included a fight to replace existing right-wing Labour councillors with candidates who oppose the privatisation scheme. This was an initiative taken by local campaigners, supported by groups including the Socialist Party, and in spite of a lack of leadership from Momentum nationally - who do not call for the reselection of council candidates or MPs.
15. The result has been that the replacement of the majority of the pro-HDV councillors with anti-HDV candidates, as well as the resignation of many right-wingers, including the council’s leader, Claire Kober. While most of the anti-HDV councillors have yet to make a clear pledge to stop implementing austerity, it is undoubtedly very positive that the HDV scheme has been pushed back, partly through this process.
16. However, on this score, Haringey is indeed exceptional. As the Blairite Guardian columnist Martin Kettle put it "what is most striking about Labour at the end of 2017 is that, so far, there is little evidence of a systematic attempt to purge the centrists and social democrats". This was an acknowledgement that, in the vast majority of areas, the Labour candidates contesting this election will be cut from the same Blairite cloth as Kober and co. This represents a failure, particularly by the leadership of Momentum, to properly mobilise against the right. Behind this failure is their mistaken policy of seeking ‘unity’ with those pro-war, pro-cuts MPs and councillors who have repeatedly attempted to stab Corbyn in the back.
17. Given this context – it would be wrong for Socialist Students to go into this year’s local elections with a position of uncritically and indiscriminately supporting and campaigning for Labour candidates. Many of them are vicious opponents of Corbyn. Indeed, their implementation of vicious austerity at local level can only serve to damage the prospects of Labour at a general election, by undermining the idea that the party offers anything fundamentally different.
18. Instead, while continuing to support Corbyn and fighting to build a movement that can kick out the Tories, Socialist Students should campaign against austerity being implemented at all levels of government – including by local authorities. While our societies remain free to make decisions about their campaigning activity in the run up to the local elections, as a national organisation, we will only support candidates who have promised to fight austerity and refuse to implement cuts – whichever rosette they wear. This will potentially include Corbyn supporters standing as Labour candidates. But often, it will be those standing against cuts making, privatising Blairite Labour candidates that Socialist Students members will support and campaign for.
19. As we take part in this campaigning, we must continue to keep sight of what might lie ahead in the future. The Tory administration has the potential to collapse at any time, especially under the pressure of mass mobilisations of workers and youth. This puts the prospect of a Corbyn-led government firmly on the horizon. As well as fighting to kick out the Tories, we must also understand that getting Corbyn into Downing Street will provide a huge opportunity for a decisive break with austerity, but in and of itself, will not mark the endpoint in this struggle. Recent history has shown that left governments who dare to challenge the cuts agenda or threaten the interests of the 1% face ferocious attacks and sabotage from the capitalist establishment. We have already had a foretaste of this in the repeated attempts of Labour’s Blairite fifth column to undermine and remove Corbyn, even before he has come to power. For this reason, the need to build a movement that can continue to fight for Corbyn’s policies, to stiffen his resolve in the face of sabotage, and to fight for socialist change – going well beyond the important (if limited) measures currently being promised, will continue to be absolutely vital going forwards.