

Defend Corbyn

Time to fight back

The concerted and slanderous campaign depicting Jeremy Corbyn and the left as antisemitic has reached a dramatic climax over the last month.

Its goal is nothing less than to decapitate the left by ousting Corbyn. Its means is to pressure the Labour Party to adopt in full a deeply flawed code on antisemitism.

Ever since Dame Margaret Hodge attacked Corbyn calling him "a fucking antisemite and a racist" on 17 July, it has become clear that the right want a witch-hunt against the left in the Labour Party. In a joint editorial just over a week later, three pro-Israel Jewish newspapers in the UK claimed that a Corbyn-led government would pose an "existential threat" to Jewish life in the UK.

The Labour leadership unsuccessfully tried to mollify critics, dropping charges against Hodge and promising to root out any antisemitism. Rather than tempering attacks, this conciliatory approach has served to embolden the right. In the last week, the leaders of Unison, GMB and Usdaw lined up behind calls on Corbyn to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism in full.

The full IHRA "working definition" of antisemitism is flawed as it would outlaw criticism of the Israeli state as a racist endeavour. The code therefore makes it next to impossible to move from criticising current policies and legislation in Israel to a deeper critique of Israel as an inherently settler colonial society where apartheid is inevitable.

Moreover, such provisions create an atmosphere in which pro-Palestine activists would feel reluctant to speak out for fear of being accused of antisemitism.

And it is entirely plausible that the code opens the way for a purge of members who are accused of being outspoken on the issue. We have already seen mass elimination of members and supporters who backed Corbyn during the challenge against his leadership of the Labour Party in 2016.

Now, past statements and activities could be used to discipline and expel prominent leftist activists, with the aim of discouraging the membership at large from engaging in pro-Palestinian activity and rolling back the broad support for Palestinian struggle in Britain.

COUNTERFIRE

We are getting a taste of this approach with the Daily Mail and Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu alleging on 13 August that Corbyn attended a ceremony in 2014 for the group that organised the Munich Olympics massacre of Israeli athletes in 1973.

Corbyn hit back that these claims were false and insisted that it is the Israeli killing of 160 Palestinian protesters – including dozens of children – in Gaza since March that ought to be condemned.

He also pointed out that he stood in solidarity with the tens of thousands of Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel who protested against the Israeli Knesset's law explicitly stating that only Jewish people have the right to self-determination in Israel. That is the kind of classic apartheid policy that the IHRA code would make it almost impossible to criticise.

That is why Corbyn is right to hit back. But he will face more pressure in the run-up to the NEC election on 4 September. With some union leaders and Momentum's Jon Lansman arguing in favour of adopting the full IHRA code, there is a danger that the right would increase its power in the Labour Party apparatus. The following day, Labour MPs are likely to vote to reject the party's current antisemitism code.

The right will also increasingly seek to couple this campaign around antisemitism with pressure to modify the party's stance on Brexit in favour of keeping Britain in the Single Market or even calling for a second referendum on Brexit. In this, the right has the support of the British establishment and much of the media.

In the run-up to the Labour Party conference in the period 23-26 September, all of this is a major threat to Corbyn. If the right succeed and change the party's existing antisemitism code, and water down the party's commitment to a People's Brexit, this will sap away at the energies and hopes of left activists and voters, and breed wider discontent and distrust with the political system.

The consequences would be disastrous. The victory of the right in Labour would only do the Conservatives a favour by pushing Brexit voters in their direction, and it would embolden the real antisemites and the far right, the likes of Tommy Robinson, who feed on disillusion with the system.

The stakes for the entire Labour movement are high. We should not retreat when we are slandered. We should not give an inch to those who defend the disasters of the Iraq War or the horrors of Israeli apartheid. We should mobilise to protest at the Labour Party Conference for Palestine and against the slanderous attacks on the left. We should fight back and restore the politics of hope.

COUNTERFIRE