

Left-Horizons

Anti-Semitism and the leadership of Momentum

We do not believe that it is a significant turning point yet for the leadership of Momentum to have dropped Peter Willsman from their NEC slate. But it is one more milestone on the drift of that organisation towards the right of the Labour Party. As disgraceful as the decision is, it was by no means unexpected and, in any case, it is likely to be ignored by the overwhelming majority of Momentum members who will still vote for Willsman.

Labour's right-wing have their tails up at the moment, and that is entirely down to the weakness of the Momentum leadership and, it has to be said, of the Labour leadership itself. No amount of tactical retreats or 'apologies' for alleged mistakes will appease the right wing. Indeed, the weakness of the left will only invite more aggression from the right. The Blairite wing of the Party wants nothing less than the ditching of Corbyn and all Labour's radical policies, and the mass expulsion of lefts from membership.

Blairite Labour MPs – and there are still scores of them – have never reconciled themselves to the left leadership of the Party, to radical policies or to a mass membership. Some of them are openly calling now for a return to the electoral college system of leadership election, in which each of their individual votes would have as much weight as two and a half thousand ordinary Party members.

From the very beginning, the campaign on anti-Semitism has been manufactured with the purpose of undermining Corbyn and the left and stifling criticism of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians. There has never been such a barrage of lies and innuendo at any Labour leader in modern times. In one day, we have the *Daily Mail*, with a headline, "Corbyn's refusal to tackle anti-Semitism is a stain on Britain..." a *Telegraph* headline "Holocaust survivor: I was silenced by Corbyn." The *i* newspaper has "Labour MPs plead with Corbyn to avoid crisis". *The Times* has a front-page story headlined, "Corbyn raised Nazi crimes to describe Israel in Gaza", when all that Corbyn did was to compare the length of time Gaza has been under siege with the sieges of Leningrad and Stalingrad.

Many Jewish Labour members support Corbyn

Over and over again, recordings are surfacing of meetings from years ago in which this or that comment was allegedly made. To take a prominent example, we have Labour MP Louise Ellman telling BBC *Newsnight* how shocked she was on reading in *The Times* that Jeremy

Corbyn had hosted a meeting on Holocaust Memorial Day in 2010, when in fact *she had been present at the meeting herself!* Ellman was apparently appalled that a contribution at that meeting had compared the Israeli treatment of Palestinians with the behaviour of Nazis. What neither she, nor *The Times* nor *Newsnight* revealed was that the comparison was made in the meeting *by a Holocaust survivor* and Ellman clearly raised no objection at the time.

The fact that many Jewish members of the Labour Party have come to the defence of Jeremy Corbyn and have denounced the fake "anti-Semitism" campaign gets barely a mention in the mainstream media. But this is hardly surprising, because the majority of the newspapers, owned by billionaires, have never been friends of Labour and have never let the truth stand in the way of a good narrative.

All the debate revolves around Israel, not Judaism or Jews

What is clear in the current furore and in the argument over which 'definition' of anti-Semitism the Labour Party should adopt, is that *none* of the debate revolves around a charge of hatred or antipathy towards people of the Jewish faith. It revolves – *without exception* – around the issue of *Israel* and its policies towards the Palestinians. It puts into sharp focus exactly *why* the Labour leadership, whilst adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) 'working definition' of anti-Semitism, has – correctly – maintained its opposition to the attached "illustrations", because every one of the "illustrations" relates to the *state of Israel*.

There are many definitions of anti-Semitism which are better than that of the IHRA, including some devised by leading Jewish academics, and which leave out the contentious "illustrations." Labour's right wing and the Labour Friends of Israel want to keep the "illustrations" appended to the 'working definition' precisely because *it is a means of disciplining any Party member who is critical of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians*.

A lot of the current charges of "anti-Semitism" are based on comparisons made between Israeli state policies and the Nazis. It has to be said that this comparison is facile, at best. The regime of military occupation and the constant violence meted out to the population of the West Bank and Gaza is brutal and unjustifiable. But it does not remotely compare to the industrial-scale and deliberate killing of

millions of Jews with gas chambers, firing squads, death pits and the like.

Indeed, as much as the IDF is guilty of appalling casual brutality against the Palestinian people, it is probably less severe than the brutality meted out in fairly recent history by Belgian soldiers in the Congo, by French troops in Algeria, by American GIs in Vietnam or by British squaddies in Kenya, to name but a few.

The issue of the Jewish Holocaust is a complex one. It is an issue that runs deep in the consciousness of Jewish people the world over and it is an ever-present issue in Israeli politics. What is also true is that the Israeli right-wing politicise the awful history of the Holocaust for its own ends – and it is the outlook of the Israeli right (not its left wing) which finds an echo in the Blairite wing of the Labour Party.

The history of the Jewish Holocaust

Although it occurred in an earlier historical period, it is quite legitimate to draw attention – for example on International Holocaust Day – to the holocaust visited on the African population by centuries of slavery. Hugh Thomas's classic book, *The Slave Trade*, estimates that somewhere between ten and thirteen million slaves were taken out of Africa, although the total is never likely to be known. It is likewise legitimate to draw attention to the massacres of the Armenian population after the foundation of the modern state of Turkey a hundred years ago.

Even in the Nazi era, it is legitimate to point out that the murder of six million Jews was accompanied by the murder of many other 'undesirables'. Martin Gilbert, author of another classic book, *The Holocaust, the Jewish Tragedy*, writes:

"Among those murdered were as many as a quarter of a million Gypsies, tens of thousands of homosexuals, and tens of thousands of 'mental defectives'. Also murdered, often after the cruelties of tortures, were several million Soviet prisoners-of-war, shot or starved to death long after they had been captured and disarmed."

"As well as the six million Jews who were murdered, more than ten million other non-combatants were killed by the Nazis. Under the Nazi scheme, Poles, Czechs, Serbs and Russians were to become subject peoples; slaves, the workers of the New Order."

It is not in any way, shape or form "anti-Semitic" to commemorate and discuss these other holocausts, as well as or alongside the attempted destruction by the Nazis of the Jewish population of Europe.

'Zionism' is an especially emotive term in the labour movement, but like all forms of national sentiment – and it is a special form of nationalism – it has a class content. It is entirely understandable that Jewish people world-wide and especially ordinary Jewish workers in Israel should have an attachment to 'zionism' (small 'z') in so far as it reflects no more than a confused desire to avoid having history repeat itself and an aspiration for a safe and secure future. Socialists, basing themselves on the common interests and unity of all workers, would argue against all forms of nationalism, including zionism but at least treat sympathetically the motivations and concerns of ordinary workers.

It is another thing altogether, however, for the zionism of the capitalist class and the attempts by the Israeli right to exploit the awful history of the Jewish people to justify appalling and completely unjustifiable policies towards the Palestinians.

Similarly, it is perfectly proper, and not in the least "anti-Semitic" to point out that within the Jewish community in Britain, the USA and elsewhere, there is a spectrum of political views from left to right, as there is in the Christian and any other faith community. Israeli politics is no different. There are many Israeli (Jewish) politicians who have used the word 'apartheid' in condemning the policies of their own government. They can hardly be described as anti-Semites. This week, coincidentally, Jerusalem saw its biggest-ever Pride march, albeit protected by hundreds of police.

Unfortunately, however, it has been the xenophobic and racist *right wing* of Israeli politics that has dominated government policy for the past two decades. It is correct, therefore, and, again, not in the least "anti-Semitic" to condemn the actions of the Israeli government towards the Palestinian population.

Where is Momentum going?

Coming back to the crisis in the Labour Party, we have to ask, where does it leave the left and Momentum? Those who condemn the behaviour of the leaders of Momentum might be angry, but they should not be surprised. Surrender is written into the DNA of the soft left. When the Labour Party, come the next election, is working out a manifesto, it will be the soft left who will be the first to surrender this or that radical policy, and always for supposed 'tactical' reasons. When Labour is elected and is determined to carry out policies in the interests of the working class, and when there is a furious opposition from the Media, the Establishment (and right-wing Labour MPs), it will be the same soft lefts – the Lansmans of the Party – who will urge that policies be watered down.

In the coming months and years there will be many debates, discussions and furious arguments inside the Labour Party as to the correct policy and strategy for the Party to follow. In those debates, it will be supporters of *Left Horizons* and other socialists who will be pressing for more determined and comprehensive socialist measures and it will be the soft lefts of the ilk of the Momentum leaders who will press for compromise and surrender.

But for the moment, unfortunately, there is no mass organised left in the Labour Party to stand up to Labour's Blairite wing – who are the *main danger* to the gains of the last two years – other than Momentum, despite its leaders' marshmallow softness. It is completely understandable that many angry left Party members are now not only refusing to vote for Lansman for the NEC but are resigning their membership of Momentum. It is nevertheless still likely that he will be elected and the mass membership of Momentum, for now, will remain intact.

What Labour's left must do is begin to organise an *alternative* to the current Momentum leadership. That means using Momentum branches, where they still meet, as a stepping stone to more effective local, regional and ultimately national coordination outside of and beyond the reach of the national leadership. 'Grassroots' Momentum was an organisation that was started immediately after the Lansman coup last year and it looked like it might have had some life in it, but unfortunately, it collapsed in on itself. Something of the same kind, a 'broad left', as it was described by a post on Facebook, needs to be started anew, to fight *inside and alongside Momentum* for socialist policies and a socialist leadership. Only when this is done will it be possible to ignore the substantial political machine that today is wielded by the Momentum leadership and Jon Lansman personally.

Editorial statement, August 2, 2018

