

Left-Horizons

Momentum moving in the wrong direction

The Labour Party has seen enormous change in the last two years. An important part of this, alongside the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader (twice) and the associated surge in membership, has been the establishment of Momentum as the largest left grouping in the Labour Party.

Momentum did not arise as the brainchild of one person. It rose out of a need, perceived by thousands of his supporters, for Jeremy Corbyn to have a strong, *organised* base of support in the Party membership, as a counter-weight to the right wing. It was clear as early as 2015, after the first leadership contest, that the 'old guard' right wing still dominated the Parliamentary Labour Party, the full-time bureaucracy of the Party and many local Constituency Labour Parties. That became evident in the attempted coup against Corbyn in the summer of 2016, but is still true today.

Had Momentum not been founded when it was, then another similar organisation, with a different name, would have evolved on much the same lines. Indeed, before Momentum existed there were already local and regional 'networks' of Corbyn supporters being set up for exactly the same purpose and these were later incorporated into Momentum. The only reason that Momentum took the particular form it did was because the massive database of supporters which was built up in the first leadership campaign needed to have a 'home' where it could be put to good use. It was only through legal incorporation of this database that Momentum effectively became the property of a single person.

Since its establishment, Momentum has built up a huge membership, with each one paying between £1 and £5 a month. It currently claims to have 150 local groups, 23,000 members and 200,000 supporters and its Twitter account has 93,000 followers. It has to be said that many of the listed local groups are now moribund and, at 23,000, the membership is around 8000 fewer than claimed a year ago. Nevertheless, its membership and income give its national organisers the wherewithal to run a large apparatus and big campaigns, far bigger than any of its left predecessors, like *Tribune*, in the past. One would have to go back to the Independent Labour Party in the 1920s to find a left Labour grouping on anything like the same scale.

Momentum claims to have made a significant impact on the election result in 2017, particularly in mobilising young Labour Party members and supporters to work in marginal constituencies and in getting out the youth vote in areas with a high student population. Momentum supporters managed batteries of phone banks right across the country – using the experience gained in the leadership election campaigns – and produced a wide variety of excellent videos and posters that were distributed widely on social media. Momentum claim that their Facebook page had 1.3 million hits in May 2017 and a total 'reach' of 17 million in the last week of the election campaign.

Since the general election, Momentum has continued to mobilise campaigners. Their *#unseat* campaign in Tory marginals is threatening the seats of leading Tory ministers. At two successive Party conferences, Momentum has organised Labour's largest-ever fringe events, described almost as 'alternative conferences' in their own right. *The World Transformed*, "a four-day event of music, art, politics and culture" is now an established feature of conference. At the conference of 2017, as many as 12-13,000 Labour Party members and delegates participated or visited the event.

As well as campaigning *externally*, Momentum has also actively campaigned *internally*, providing the main impetus for the election of an all-left slate in the CLP section of Labour's National Executive Committee last year, and ensuring that the three additional CLP places elected later were also won by the left. Locally, Momentum members and supporters have won many positions and up and down the country. Constituency Labour Parties have seen left-wingers elected into leading positions as the Labour Party moves solidly to the left. Much to the horror of the Tory press, the success of Momentum locally has also led to the selection of left candidates for the forthcoming local authority elections, often displacing incumbents who had fallen out of favour of their local Party membership.

Momentum began as a 'grassroots' movement

So far so good. What is of concern to many socialists, however, is the *vice-like grip* that one individual holds over Momentum and its complete lack of transparency and accountability at the top. It is obviously no bad thing to have a clean sweep of left-wingers elected to the Labour NEC. But it is a pity that only a tiny minority of the tens of thousands of Labour Party members who took part in the vote would have any idea where the list of left candidates came from, or *who decided* they would be the left slate in the first place. Ominously we already have a situation where one of the newly-elected 'left' NEC members has voted to expel a Labour member on spurious grounds.

When it first began, Momentum claimed to be a 'grassroots' organisation offering a 'new' type of politics. Its initial structure allowed for an elected National Committee, with a majority of regional delegates, from whom a Steering Committee was elected. Unfortunately, just when the leadership could no longer put off having a national delegate conference – which would probably have questioned the direction, structures and 'ownership' of Momentum – the Steering Committee imposed a new constitution, *without any consultation with its members* or the National Committee. Indeed, the Steering Committee did not dissolve itself, but dissolved the National Committee, *the body from which it drew its authority*. The National Committee was replaced by a National Coordinating Group (NCG), which is a *consultative body*, without any power or control over the leadership. Members were notified of this move – correctly described as a *coup* – by e-mail and invited to resign from Momentum if they didn't agree

with it. A link on the e-mail offered precisely that option. It was a case of like it or lump it.

For all its very positive work, therefore, Momentum is an organisation governed by a self-perpetuating clique and is effectively the 'property' of one person. The promise of mass participation through 'electronic democracy' has not materialised. Those in Momentum who warned against this 'e-democracy' have been vindicated. The on-line elections that have been held only attract a limited participation of members. In the most recent election to the NCG massive artificial 'regions' were cobbled together with, for example, Wales being in the same 'region' as Essex. Even those members who did participate knew nothing about candidates living three hundred miles away. As is the case with all on-line elections controlled from the top, it meant the 'apparatus' organising the election generally gets the result it wants.

Meanwhile, local branches of Momentum have been constitutionally cut off from the national organisation, without any role or purpose. Although many local branches are still thriving, there are also many that are now moribund or not meeting at all. That is partly because the Momentum members have gained a significant influence in the Labour Party and they see little point in keeping Momentum going any longer – why have Momentum meetings when the Labour Party now does what Momentum used to do? But it is also partly because of the absence of any constitutional or democratic framework in which branches can operate. Local groups have no role in the new constitution.

More seriously, since the constitutional coup of January 2017, and notwithstanding the campaigning election work of Momentum, it has shown signs that it is edging to the right. From the very beginning, the national leadership avoided taking a clear-cut political position on any issue. In the days when it had a democratically elected National Committee, its leading figure (and still the leading figure today) managed to *prevent any discussion* on Labour's Compliance Unit and the issue of anti-Semitism, two related issues about which there was a lot of anger on the National Committee.

National leadership bowed to pressure from media

Even in those early days, the national leadership also disgracefully bowed to pressure from the media to suspend its then vice-chair, Jacqui Walker, from her position, on the completely spurious charge of anti-Semitism and the leaders enthusiastically welcomed the suspension of Ken Livingstone from the Labour Party, again on spurious grounds. In so far as Momentum has any *political* policy at all, it is that disseminated by the clique at the top and no-one else. The national office has even taken down posts on 'regional' Facebook accounts where local Momentum members posted comments not to the liking of national office, for example, (again), conflating anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism.

On its website, Momentum describes its aim as "To transform Labour into a modern, grassroots, member-led party with a transformative, socialist programme", but in practice it has been edging further away from its original goals. Apart from the constitutional coup we have outlined, it has recently changed some of the 'aims' on its website. A previously declared aim to "create a mass movement for real transformative change" was changed last November to "bring together individuals and groups in our workplaces and communities to campaign and organise on the issues that matter to us". For Momentum to explicitly ditch the idea of a "mass movement" says something about the evolution of the thinking of its leadership.

More significantly, Momentum has very explicitly disavowed the principle of mandatory re-selection of MPs. Its chairman told the *Independent* recently that "Momentum nationally is not going to campaign to deselect any MP and we will stick by that...We have made it

clear that we are not going to campaign to deselect anyone, at all, anywhere". The irony is, of course, that the majority of Momentum members probably *do* support the idea of mandatory re-selection. That there ought to be a *full selection process before every election* and that there are *no candidates-for-life* are very popular ideas among the new Labour Party members. That is a view we share, but it is clearly not Momentum's view.

Momentum is a new incubator for 'left' careerists

For the foreseeable future, Momentum will probably continue on twin tracks, with *local* groups of activists separated politically and organisationally from *national* Momentum. Leaning on the support of the *national* leadership, Momentum has to some degree already become a home for some who were previously on the right wing of the party. **Momentum is in danger of becoming comfortable incubator for a new breed of careerists whose only qualification for Momentum support is to describe themselves as 'left'.**

This means that there is no longer a guarantee that candidates backed by Momentum are even genuinely on the left. At the recent parliamentary selection meeting in Calder Valley CLP, for example, *local* Momentum members were dismayed to find that the *national* Momentum organisation was backing a candidate who had previously supported Owen Smith against Jeremy Corbyn. Their own preferred (local) candidate was overlooked. This sort of fracture between local activists and national Momentum will happen increasingly as the national leadership drifts to the right.

However, this 'twin-track' arrangement is not sustainable in the long run. When (not if) Labour is elected into government, it will be faced with a *tsunami* of opposition from the banks, big business, the press and the establishment in general, not excluding the right wing of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the Labour full-time bureaucracy. **Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell and the whole Labour leadership will be put under enormous pressure to dilute or completely abandon the reforms and radical measures** it will include in its manifesto.

In the crisis that follows Labour's election, therefore, a new period of turmoil will open up inside the Labour Party. There will be more debate, discussion, dissent and disagreement in the Party than there has been for decades, even including the recent past. Readers and supporters of the ideas of *Left Horizons* will play a part in that ferment, always arguing the case, in a patient and fraternal manner, for socialist measures.

It is likely in such a period that Labour will again experience a renewal of its membership, as happened in the two leadership campaigns and the general election. Momentum too, may experience a resurgence of activity in its membership and especially in the activity of its local groups. In that period of fluidity, debate and discussion, the 'owners' of Momentum will not be able to maintain the iron grip they have on the organisation now. *Momentum will face a choice of either opening itself up to genuine debate and democratic accountability, or it will become effectively a part of the Labour bureaucracy, even to the point of supporting the expulsion and suspension of its critics on the left.* If it is the latter, it will be overwhelmingly rejected by leftward-moving Labour Party members.

As any scientist will confirm, the concept of 'momentum' in Physics is a *vector* quantity, that is one that always has both a magnitude and a direction. *Political* Momentum certainly has magnitude – it boasts 23,000 members – but unfortunately, from where we stand now, it looks like its direction of motion is from left to right and that does not augur well for the future.

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