**THE SITUATION IN BRITAIN**

**Resolution carried as amended – ACR conference 31 January 2021**

**The situation in Britain**

1. The working class in the British state is facing a series of attacks on every level. Much of it has seen a decade long decline in real wages of about 15% over the past decade. In much of the private sector job insecurity and poverty wages have become the norm. This is combined with deep poverty and malnutrition becoming commonplace. GP practices and social workers refer people to food banks run by religious organisations and charities. The welfare state does little more than keep many of the people who rely on it half-starved in miserable privately rented homes.
2. The Covid-19 pandemic has illuminated the impact of income levels and quality of housing on health outcomes. It has also demonstrated that some of the ruling class is so determined to make profits that it is willing to pass death sentences on workers whom it seeks to compel to go into manifestly unsafe workplaces such as schools.
3. However, one of the main features of the current political moment is that Labour still does not seem to be a credible potential government. A fundamental reason for this is that the Johnson leadership has successfully fought and won a culture war inside the Conservative Party, persuading significant numbers of working-class voters that their material interests were less important than an English nationalist Brexit. While it is fairly certain that the Tories will eventually dump Johnson as a result of his handling of the pandemic all talk of bringing down a government with a majority of eighty seats is counter-factual fiction. That requires social struggles drawing millions of people onto the streets and into activity on scale which is without precedent in modern British political history.
4. Starmer’s leadership of the Labour has been a counter-revolution against Corbynism and its legacy. He is shifting its centre of gravity in an attempt to persuade older, right-wing ex-Labour voters that he shares their racist views on immigration and reactionary ideas on patriotism and the monarchy. His decision to whip the party’s MP’s to support Johnson and Gove’s Brexit deal is the deepest nadir of his leadership until the next one comes along.
5. Labour has voted to stab in the back the three million or so EU citizens who live in the British state; it has acquiesced to immigration controls on 450 000 million Europeans coming here; it has permitted the Tories to further weaken protections for workers and the environment. It is endorsing a racists’ charter.
6. There have been movements of rebellion, but these invariably flare briefly and fail to leave no enduring organisational structures. Black Lives Matter BLM) got thousands of young black and white activists onto the streets across the British state, but its ongoing impact is cultural and ideological. Discussions of race, racism and imperialism are now more challenging and mainstream than they have ever been before, but this does not translate into organisational structures which see their job as creating instruments to put the working class in control of society.
7. Extinction Rebellion (XR) has had an equally significant impact over a longer period than BLM. It created networks of activists who were willing to take significant personal risks and commit themselves to extended periods of intense activity. Just as BLM did with the discussion around racism, XR made the environment a subject of intense debate. However, they expressly described themselves as a movement with no interest in politics, this despite the fact that humanity’s response to the climate crisis is the most significant political question of our times.

**Something new on the left?**

1. The forces that drove Brexit were using the concept of 'regaining British sovereignty' as a cover for removing the UK from international obligations and regulations covering workers and environmental rights. The Tory party and the scattered forces that were grouped around UKIP dream of Thatcherism on steroids, a deregulated labour market, no red tape around environmental protections. This is the Singapore model so beloved of free marketeers, which one academic described as n "ultra-business-friendly environment with low or zero corporation tax, low wages, weak trade unions, vestigial welfare provisions and a significant temporary migrant ‘non-citizen’ workforce (around 30 per cent of the total workforce), largely without the protection of national labour laws or access to welfare provisions." This project will necessitate a strong response from workers and the left, but we have to be aware that the balance of class forces is not currently in our favour. A fight in the unions to make them aware of the consequences of Brexit and a call on them to take action will be essential.
2. There have been multiple attempts to establish new radical left parties outside and to the left of Labour over the past 20 years. None of them have been successful other than for short periods in isolated localities. To a certain extent this is due to the depth and durability of the sectarianism of the British radical left. ‘Genuine radical left unity’ was a formidable bar to meet. Just as significantly, the first past the post (FPTP) electoral system effectively ruled out parliamentary representation for small parties and therefore the principal imperative for unity. This meant that any breakaway new party, left or right, would face a more or less inevitable wipe-out at the next election. Even when Ukip was getting millions of votes its only people in parliament were Tory defectors.
3. The predominant culture on the organised British radical left was (and remains) not to build these new formations in a serious way but to polarise discussions with a view to individual recruitment. It’s an expressly sectarian mode of doing politics and has repeatedly been an obstacle to building alternative organisations. There is no evidence that any of the larger left groups have changed their approach on this.
4. The Socialist Alliance, Respect and Left Unity did include groups and individuals who shared an assessment that there was space on the British left for an organisation of 20 000 or so which could be a local version of Syriza in Greece or Podemos in the Spanish State. Like Bernie Sanders more recently, they expressed a desire for a radical anti-capitalist politics.
5. Corbynism when it happened was, therefore, first and foremost an anti-austerity movement bringing an end to many decades of little difference between Labour and the Tories. It was hugely popular among the most class-conscious young people and sections of the working class
6. It also reflected the Scottish referendum campaign, and the huge radicalisation that had taken place, particularly amongst young people. It reflects the impact of the anti-austerity alliance between the Greens, the SNP and Plaid during the May election campaign, followed by the impact of the SNP in Parliament since the where they have often provided the only real opposition to Cameron and Osborne.
7. By the time Corbyn had won the second round of the leadership election the following year with an increased majority the Labour Party had doubled in size and was now bigger than all the other parties put together and with a huge intake of young people.
8. Corbynism was a unique movement in British politics. Despite being left social democratic it had the possibility of going beyond left social democracy should it survive the onslaught by the right (who drew the same conclusion) and win a general election and survive the next onslaught. It made big gains in the 2017 election on the basis of an uncompromising stance against austerity and a pledge to transform the situation of young people though it failed to win a majority. In the 2019 election it was defeated by a combination of a massive right-wing vilification campaign and the takeover of the election by Brexit leaving a situation under which Corbyn could not win.

**Things to consider**

1. An unintended consequence of Brexit is that it has increased support for Scottish independence. Most of that country’s population see leaving the European Union (EU) as a reactionary step and reject it on those grounds. They may have illusions in the EU but barely a week goes by without Johnson reminding them about English nationalism. While supporters of ACR may have a range of views on the breakup of the British state only an English nationalist would oppose the right of the Scottish people to assert their independence.
2. It’s improbable that the north of Ireland will be leaving the British state any time soon. The main reason for this is that the southern ruling class don’t want it to and have developed the mythology of a “shared island” to mask the fact. However, support for Irish self-determination is a point of principle for Marxists in Britain.
3. The world crisis, the worst in human history, is accelerating and deepening. The capitalist system is experiencing a crisis of legitimacy, although this in uneven depending on national conjunctures. The situation in Britain in characterised by a long period of defeats and setbacks for working people. Trade unions are much weaker, strikes are at their lowest, Brexit further divided and confused working people and Covid makes political organising and action very difficult. Consequently The struggles of the coming year particularly under Covid are more likely to be defensive than offensive. Local government budgets are going to be pared to the bone by the Tories. Starmer’s victory was a massive defeat, and the direction of his leadership has turned out even worse that most of us expected. However we should not at this time all leave the Labour Party. We should stay inside, defend anti-austerity politics and the modest steps forward that the last two Labour manifestos represented, the Green New Deal in particular. This is not the same is saying that everyone needs to commit to endless evenings of futile drudgery. If your local Labour Party is dead as a doornail you are not going to change it singlehandedly. On the other hand, if there are activists with a commitment or openness to class struggle you should engage with them and Labour is a good vehicle for that. We will work to encourage Labour party activists to link up with militants who are not members in the workplaces, communities and campaigns. We work both with comrades who are staying in Labour to fight the new leadership and also with many comrades who, fed up with the party, are leaving but want to stay active socialists.
4. Parliamentary democracy and the liberal centre are historically bereft of responses and solutions – epitomised in Britain by the pitiful ineffectiveness of the Starmer leadership of the Labour Party. Nevertheless given the scale of Covid crisis it is still possible that projects based on Keynesian reflationary policies will be attempted in different ways by possibly by the Tories but more probably by a Starmer government. It is not inevitable that Starmer will go back to purely Blairite policies or that Johnson will simply repeat Osborne austerity. There has been a sharp polarisation to the Right, represented by the Brexit Tories, and the Left, best represented by the Black Lives Matter protests last summer, though also noteworthy has been the National Education Union role in the Zero Covid campaign this winter. We should expect further upsurges of this type or even more radical in the period ahead. Socialists should be involved wherever activists come together to debate the way forward and plan for action. This will include many local Labour parties and other Labour groupings, but will also include trade unions, student rent strikes, women’s struggles, anti-racist campaigns, XR groups, LGBTQ+ equality struggles, and many xmore. A particular priority should be the Zero Covid campaign, since the pandemic is likely to remain the central issue during 2021, and it offers a potential framework for social struggles around jobs, health and safety at work, income support, student fees and rents, evictions, etc.
5. We cannot predict the issue, the form, or the timing of future struggles. But we are entering a period of deepening social distress, and we can assume this will trigger revolts from below. Some will be more permanent and have more impact than others. Defeats and setbacks are also possible. The continuing pandemic places a certain limit on social mobilisations. The job of socialists is to encourage revolt, fan the flames, join the struggles together, and work to build the self-organisation of the working class, the oppressed, and the youth necessary in sustaining and expanding the resistance.
6. We face a profound ecological crisis that is overwhelming and increasing. We need action now but also system change to stop climate catastrophe. Public awareness of the crisis has never been higher, due most importantly to the inspirational intervention of Greta Thunberg and her school strike movement, the emergence of XR, the success of the anti-fracking campaigns. ACR must reach out to the new activists who are radicalising in response. The Glasgow COP in November should be the biggest campaigning focus around climate change this year. Its outcome will set the stage for the next round of struggle. We should help organise mass mobilisations during the summit with the demand of “keep the rise at 1.5 to stay alive”.