

What next for Labour?

David Ridley argues for a Freirean approach to future Labour Party campaigning.

Last month's UK general election result was deeply disappointing. Having joined the Labour Party three years ago after Jeremy Corbyn's surprise leadership race win, I had invested massively in the Corbyn project as a way to move beyond neoliberalism. While it is certainly true that 'Corbynism' in policy terms promised merely a return to social democracy, nationalising the key elements of the UK's infrastructure, strengthening the welfare state and making education free for all ages, I saw like many others something else as well. Lost in the chaos of recriminations and autocritique after the election is the essence of Corbynism as a form of *critical pedagogy*. Hilary Wainwright saw this more clearly than most, when she wrote:

What is striking about Jeremy Corbyn, and what makes him different from other European leaders of the radical left - often called 'left populist' - is that his appeal is not centred on himself as a charismatic leader. It is based on an invitation to join an urgent crusade for a new politics based on popular participation. His promise is to invite people to participate in developing the policies that the government he seeks to lead would implement. He is not a left populist in the sense of being a leader in whom the people are encouraged to invest their faith, against the elite. His appeal has been his encouragement to people to have confidence in themselves (1).

What Corbynism promised was a 'new politics of the left', Wainwright insisted, one that continued a tradition bridging early syndicalists like Tom Mann

and the movement for workers' control in the 1970s, but with an emphasis on green transformation and economic modernisation. This was the Corbynism I believed in and fought hard for in Coventry and beyond. But this movement has been dealt a crushing blow with Labour's loss of 42 parliamentary seats, with the 'red wall' in the North finally broken by a swing to the Tories in those areas and the party being all but wiped out in Scotland.

The recriminations now coming from both left and right wings of the party all contain a grain of truth, but also the material contradictions that are obscured by focusing on any one aspect of what was an extremely complex social reality that Corbyn was forced to operate in:

- **Hatred of Corbyn:** There is overwhelming anecdotal evidence that Corbyn was hugely unpopular on the doorstep and was never popular with older Labour supporters. However, Corbyn was not a charismatic leader, for better or worse, and, as many have already pointed out, this figure of hatred was an ideological construction and a caricature of the real man. It is simply not true that Corbyn was a 'terrorist sympathiser' or anti-Semite. What this hatred of Corbyn revealed was less about Corbyn than about the deep influence of traditional and social media in structuring our perception of reality.
- **Brexit:** For some, Corbyn betrayed the Brexit-voting Northern working class by conceding a second referendum thanks to pressure from within the party; for others, his position was not 'Remain' enough. However, we know that Brexit was in many ways a proxy for the deep alienation felt by working people in globalised capitalism. This alienation also affects the middle and even ruling classes, producing a fetishized politics that hides real

questions about who owns and controls the economy, questions that Labour was beginning to address with its ideas and plans for co-operative, municipal and national forms of public ownership.

- **Elitism:** Corbyn's Labour was a youthful party, with many naive and inexperienced people joining and influencing its long-term direction, particularly the 2019 manifesto. Aditya Chakraborty is harsh but fair when he describes the most recent manifesto as a 'melange of ideas' lacking prioritisation and contextualisation. However, youthful Corbynism reflects a generational shift in politics in which young people understand that their future is being cancelled by a political elite uninterested in climate change and an increasingly fearful older generation desperately trying to hold on to the crumbs won via Thatcherite deregulation.

Fear is key. Many are asking why the working class voted against its interests by switching from Labour to Conservative. For Paulo Freire, the answer lies in recognising the 'fear of freedom' which afflicts the oppressed, a fear which 'may equally well lead them to desire the role of oppressor or bind them to the role of oppressed' (2). Influenced by psychoanalysis, Freire considered that the oppressed in society 'housed' their oppressors and their way of life within their consciousness, causing them to want 'at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them' (3). Reinforced by 'banking' approaches to compulsory and adult education - which treat people like empty vessels to be filled with reified information - and manipulative media technology, the alienation of the oppressed from their own creative powers make them 'full of fear and mistrust' (4).

Mistrust

How can we, as educators, help people overcome their fear and mistrust and begin to address the root causes of alienation? By engaging, Freire would suggest, with the oppressed as equals within a 'problem-posing' or 'dialogic' relationship of mutual education and struggle. Such dialogic communication - which Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* developed into an entire liberation methodology, also known as 'critical pedagogy' - must be 'loving, humble, and full of faith' (5). Breaking this down into its constituent parts, this means: (a) 'true solidarity with the oppressed . . . fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these "beings for another" (6)', (b) not assuming superior knowledge, but rather that 'there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know'; and perhaps most importantly, (c) an 'intense faith in

humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (7)'. In other words, if we want to rebuild our movement against neoliberalism, we must stand together in unity, with no assumption of intellectual superiority and with an 'a priori' trust in the ability of the working class to liberate themselves.

The need for Labour activists to now go out into communities and speak to 'real people' is a common theme of many post-election autocritiques (8). But what Freire points to is the need to go beyond the stated concerns of the oppressed - many will not even consider themselves oppressed - to the objective, material conditions and contradiction driving these concerns. Critical pedagogy 'makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed', Freire explains, 'and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation (9)'. The contradictions of social life under capitalism not only produce false conceptions of reality but also provide the 'curriculum' of critical pedagogy. We must begin with the 'present, existential, concrete situation', Freire insists (10). This way emancipatory political programmes are connected to real life struggles. We should make no bones about using the language of Marxism here, nor of using the language of class. People are not 'disenfranchised', Donald Macedo maintains, they are dominated by a ruling class that is happy to use divide and rule and manipulation tactics to maintain their domination over the oppressed (11). Liberation is class struggle, and often 'painful'; we should never forget this.

One criticism of Corbynism that I think is valid, particularly in its most recent stages, is its tendency to rely on a closed circle of activists and experts to create policy and its reliance on problematic modes of communication. While Labour did engage in policy consultations and encourage local activists to input their ideas via Conference, many of these grassroots ideas - such as the excellent and self-explanatory 'Abolish Eton' campaign - were ignored in the manifesto. Freire warned that expedience and overwhelming political difficulty could turn liberatory movements into unwittingly manipulative ones. This problem was reflected in Labour's use of social media; devastatingly effective in the 2017 election and offering the party a way to bypass the mainstream media, two years later Corbyn's message was lost in the noise of disinformation and propagands. 'Unfortunately, those who espouse the cause of liberation are themselves surrounded and influenced by the climate which generates the banking concept, and often do not perceive its true

significance or its dehumanizing power', Freire warned. 'Paradoxically, then, they utilize this same instrument of alienation in what they consider an effort to liberate'. Liberation must always proceed dialogically, and with a practical focus. Liberators use the weapons of the ruling class with peril - they are designed for subjugation.

Grassroots

Having said this, Labour has, in my experience at least, made huge progress in rebuilding its grassroots base. In Coventry, for example, I have seen wards and CLPs democratised and populated with good activists. I think that much of the criticism of Labour's alienation from the working class reflects the London centricity that is a large part of this problem. For all of its faults, Momentum provided new structures to connect local left-Labour activists with the hundreds of thousands of people that joined the party in the wake of Corbyn's election, and also with existing labour movement structures like trade union councils and single-issue campaign groups. While Momentum was plagued with accusations of 'entryism', members of left parties that were either ejected by Labour in the past or chose to go their separate ways - the Socialist Party, for example - finally had a space to interact and bring their substantial experience to the democratic struggle. Rebuilding the labour movement from the bottom up, given the destruction wreaked on its body and soul by Thatcher in the 1980s, was always going to be a long and difficult process. I think, however, that this is the most resilient part of the Corbyn project and holds the best chance of nurturing the party's return to democratic socialism and recovering its earlier participatory ethos.

What next? A period of reflection, as Corbyn suggests. It is doubtful that Corbyn will survive the current internal bloodbath to be able to lead this reflection. By the time this article is published, I expect Corbyn to have been pushed out and a new leadership election started, with reflection skipped over in favour of action. I hope that we manage to elect a left leader and deputy leader who can at least guide the party through the immediate chaos and establish continuity so that effective renewal can take place. In the meantime, reflection can be pursued where it is most needed: at the ward and CLP levels. First, comradely and constructive dialogue must be encouraged within these structures so that unity can be restored. Second, local activists must go out into their communities and find out why people voted the way they did. But, as suggested, these interactions must be dialogical and aimed at identifying the contextually specific

and inflected root causes of this alienation. Freire suggested a process of 'thematic investigation' in which activists identify particularly pertinent contradictions through face-to-face interactions, which can then be turned into 'codifications' - texts, images, films, performances, etc - for discussion within 'investigation circles' of no more than 20 people. Freire's work could provide a methodological framework for local LPs seeking to move forward.

While reconnecting with communities and continuing to rebuild its base are crucial first steps, it is crucial also that Labour takes forward its ambitious policy programme and reconnects these policies with people's real material needs. Lost within a shopping list of radical proposals, Labour's National Education Service and Green Transformation programme stand out as ideas that provide holistic frameworks for individual policies that are both popular and essential for the future wellbeing of society. Neoliberalism has destroyed both compulsory and adult education. Privatisation and marketisation have turned a paternalistic yet adequate system into one that actively turns children into consumers of information and infantilised consumers. Adult education has been decimated, with the responsibility for training passed onto individuals and skilled professions 'proletarianised'. Once shielded from the market, universities are now education factories, funnelling desperate graduates into low-skilled and precarious work and churning out economically useful research for investment-shy corporations (12). If we are to have any hope of producing critical, democratic citizens and socially useful economies, we must reverse this commodification and make all levels of education free to access at any point in the life cycle (13).

Climate

Education has an absolutely crucial role to play in addressing climate change (14). Despite the stultification of compulsory education today, young people have led the way in the struggle to put climate change at the centre of politics. Greta Thunberg has become a symbol of this new generation, calling out the 'betrayal' of democratic governments in failing to take on business in the interests of the future (15). But this cry of anger needs a political programme to give it direction and longevity. Labour promised to take on the 'powerful vested interests' that had created today's 'vastly unequal and polluting economy' and pointed to 'Tory privatisation of our utilities [that] has been a disaster for both our planet and our wallets'. 'We will put people and planet before profit by bringing our

energy and water systems into democratic public ownership', the manifesto pledged. 'In public hands, energy and water will be treated as rights rather than commodities, with any surplus reinvested or used to reduce bills. Communities themselves will decide, because utilities won't be run from Whitehall but by service-users and workers. Public ownership will secure democratic control over nationally strategic infrastructure and provide collective stewardship for key natural resources' (16).

'Absurd'

But, as Chakraborty noted, divorced from local conditions and real material needs, these ideas can sound 'utterly absurd on a doorstep on a rainy morning'. While climate change does in all seriousness mean socialism or barbarism in the all-too-immediate future, we cannot, in favour of a technocratic, paternalistic 'Green New Deal', skip the hard, hard work of building 'unity, organisation and struggle'. We must go out into communities and find out what is needed, find out through dialogic inquiry how these needs can be provided in a carbon-neutral or carbon-positive way, and then implement these changes together, democratising any social and political institutions as required along the way. There is an important precedent for this kind of environmentalist critical pedagogy, which I have written about before: the Lucas Plan (17). In the 1970s, a group of shop stewards at Lucas Aerospace produced an alternative corporate plan with 150 'socially useful' product ideas put forward by the workforce, in dialogue with their wider communities. The Lucas Plan shows how a 'just transition' to a green, democratic economy can provide the perfect framework for a truly modernist, socialist movement. But let's be clear, this work in no way depends on the Labour Party. The labour movement is bigger than Labour. If Labour cannot rise to this challenge and turns its back on the essence of Corbynism - democratic socialism - then we may have to find a new vehicle for this class and climate struggle.

Notes

1. Wainwright, H. (2018) *A New Politics from the Left*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 34-5

2. Freire, P. (2005) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Continuum, p. 46

3. Ibid p. 63

4. Ibid p. 116.

5. Ibid p. 91

6. Ibid p. 49

7. Ibid p. 90

8. See, for example, Gary Younge's 'Labour won't win again until it works out why it lost', *The Guardian* 13/12/19

9. Freire, p. 47

10. Ibid p. 85

11. Macedo, D. (2005) 'Introduction', in Freire (2005), p. 21

12. See my pamphlet, *Markets, Monopolies and Municipal Ownership* for an account of this process: <https://hemarketisation.wordpress.com/pamphlet/>

13. See my contribution to Labour's last Policy Forum consultation: <https://educationfortomorrow.org.uk/how-to-create-truly-public-tertiary-education-system-under-labour/>

14. See my article 'Educating for a Green New Deal' for a critical review of Ann Pettifor's recent book *The Case for a Green New Deal* and how tertiary education and critical pedagogy can contribute to green transformation: <https://hemarketisation.wordpress.com/2019/11/09/educating-for-a-green-new-deal/>

15. See Thunberg's speech at the UN Climate Action Summit: <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>

16. <https://labour.org.uk/manifesto/a-green-industrial-revolution/>

17. <https://www.redpepper.org.uk/what-can-academics-learn-from-the-lucas-plan/>