

Labour for 'Family, Faith, and Flag'



REBECCA LONG-BAILEY, recently penned an article for the *Guardian* in which she insisted that Labour “cannot return to the politics of the past”. She is a prominent ‘continuity candidate’ for the leadership of the Labour Party. She wants to follow Jeremy Corbyn in fighting for the many, not the few, but like her mentor she is rhetorically progressive and forward thinking, but simply cannot avoid looking back to the days when the Labour movement embraced the outlook of the working-class communities densely crammed around shipyards, mines, and mills. Rebecca was born in the year of Thatcher’s first election victory which:

[P]recipitated an attack on our working-class communities, picking apart the bonds that held us together and the institutions that made us proud.

Rebecca remembers that she grew up watching her “father’s friends lose their jobs.”

The Shell oil docks where [her father] worked, once a beacon of good pay and security for industrial workers in our area, was shut down, and my family was forced to relocate.

This trip down memory lane leads Rebecca into some surprising notions:

Real wealth and power must be returned to the people of Britain.

“Returned” is a curious thought, as if the workers at the Shell oil docks with their “good pay and security” had, in some sense, “wealth and power” to lose? When it is crystal clear to all and sundry that wealth and power has always eluded working class people since commerce and trade came to rule society in the last quarter of the seventeenth century.

This slip of the pen, or ‘mis-speaking’, by Long-Bailey rests, like many of Labourism’s claims, on dodgy histories, which become dodgier the further left one goes. They persist in conceiving of the working class as static, frozen in the halcyon days of Clem Attlee and Nye Bevan. The fact that the working class is the creation of capital, which makes and remakes the conditions under which working class people live and work, seems to pass these Corbynites by, unscathed. They’ve clearly forgotten their Marx and Engels, or perhaps they’ve never read the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them

the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

The destruction of British Industry in the eighties and nineties of the last century was not the malign work of Margaret Thatcher. She was, to be sure, the one in charge of a fundamental reorganisation of British capitalism, but the catastrophic changes wrought during her time in office were driven by the needs of the capitalist class to off-load industries that could no longer attract sufficient funds or produce an adequate return on historic investments.

This led to the transformation of work places, the technologies routinely employed, the kind of skills, education, and training required, and consequently, the transformation of working-class life as the old employments and institutions that had held communities together withered and died. This undoubted reality has created a kind of double-think in the minds of Labour politicians and activists, where they acknowledge the disappearance of the conditions that held the working class and the Labour movement together, while simultaneously asserting its existence.

For example, Long-Bailey insists that:

“Labour’s trade unions . . . and party members . . .
. . . are our roots in every workplace and
community.”

Now, I don't know if she was led into this lie by her desire for a rhetorical flourish, but lie it is. Trade unions and Labour Party members are not present in "every workplace"—and the party and the unions do not have roots in every community; it's doubtful if they ever did. Union membership as Long-Bailey must surely know is concentrated in rail transport and the public sector — it is very weak or simply non-existent in the private sector, where most workers are employed. Trade union branches, trades councils, and other Labour movement organisations have a spectral presence, if at all, in most working-class communities. The Anglicans, other Christians, mosques, and charities of all sorts, have a much more prominent role in working class neighbourhoods than the Labour movement.

Despite this reality Long-Bailey and others see a future for Labour:

[I]n good, unionised jobs and the
reindustrialisation of our regions and nations.

The idea seems to be that a "green industrial revolution" will restore the fortunes of former rust bucket towns and neighbourhoods, and the prospects of the Labour Party too. Communities will be brought back to life with plenty of industrial employment regulated by reinvigorated trade unions. No thought seems to have been given to the role of new technology which will not provide mass employment in new facilities. Modern green construction, for example, would rely increasingly upon prefabrication of housing and other building elements within highly automated factories, not to mention high on-site efficiencies, which would also minimise the labour required.

Increasing manufacturing in today's conditions requires not merely new skill-sets, but relatively small, highly motivated, and engaged labour, a world away from the closely supervised mass workforces of old. The world has changed irrevocably, and the active working class has changed with it.

In hoping for a restoration of industrial communities, and the fabled solidarity and common-sharing, that supposedly characterised them, Rebecca Long-Bailey also recognises the need to revive what she calls, “progressive patriotism and solidarity in a form fit for modern Britain.”

Astonishingly, she reminds us of Lancashire mill workers’ support for the North during the American Civil War. This is astonishing, not because it is untrue. (Workers across Lancashire did indeed support the struggle against chattel slavery.) It is astonishing, because support for the Union against the Confederacy, an act of international solidarity, is described as “progressive patriotism”.

Surely, the manner in which the working class rallied to the defence of Britain in 1939 and 1940 is much more relevant. Because it was in this struggle that the overwhelming majority of British workers ignored the anti-British-Empire slogans of the Communist Party and the USSR – then in alliance with the Nazis – and stood full-square with Churchill and Attlee in the battle against fascism.

One can only surmise that Labour politicians find casting examples of international solidarity as “patriotism”, more congenial, than struggles that involve defending the nation, warts and all, against foreign enemies.

What these arguments on industry, community, and the nation, make clear is that the Labour left, desperate after the shocking defeat on 12th December, is sliding inexorably towards ‘Blue Labour’. The Blue Labour of Maurice Glassman, Paul Embery, and others, is part of the *Zeit Geist* in which the decay of post-industrial communities is provoking a kind of political sociology in which attachment to neighbourhood, family life, and national loyalties are thought to hold the key to attempts to reattach those people alienated by liberal globalisation – the ‘left behind’ – to the political nation. The Conservatives have Phillip Blond’s, ‘Red Toryism’, and Boris Johnson’s “one-nation” palaver, which stands

opposite, but in essential alignment with 'Blue Labour', in advocating reciprocity, mutuality, national loyalties and communal solidarity.

These trends are modern in the sense that they embrace gay rights and are explicitly anti-racist. Yet their belief that responding to the atavism of those whose lives have been unravelled by globalisation, with "Family, Faith, and Flag" is foolhardy in the extreme. It is wrong-headed to imagine that the presentation of the problem – the small 'c' conservatism of many working-class people – can be tackled as a cultural problem, independent of the economic pressures and forces which have embedded this conservatism in many communities.

Assuming that liberal globalisation is not going to go away, and that the options of national governments to determine the terms of trade are likely to continue to be severely limited for some time, the prospects of both Blue and Red strands of this communitarian trend look pretty limited. The communities which have been smashed, and more or less, broken up by deindustrialisation, and globalisation, will have to be replaced by new employments, and new activities, associated with new technologies, and the new styles of living that have already replaced the old industrial working class life in the areas that have not been 'left behind'.

The future must involve not the rebuilding of traditional community life, but in extending the investment, jobs, education, and training, into the forgotten areas of the country.

The commitment of Blue Labour to democratic community management and provision of services locally, rather than centralised or bureaucratic forms of control, is extremely positive. But the belief that political sociology can point the way to a restoration of Labour's fortunes is deeply flawed. Only strategies that seek to identify the crisis of social democracy in liberal globalisation, only strategies that reject an atavistic return to the small 'c' conservative certainties of the past, and attempt to chart a course towards

extending the active engagement of the entire working class in modern economic activity, has a hope of working.

If the Labour Party wants to restore its fortunes it will have to become the champion of the latest incarnation of the working class – and stop singing elegiac hymns for the proletariat of yesteryear.

Of course, the struggle against capitalism is another matter, but that has never really been on Labour's agenda at any time since the foundation of the party.

See also 'Striving for Jerusalem' at
<https://donmilligan.net/off-the-cuff/p7?>

See also 'Working Class? What Working Class':
<http://www.socialistproject.org/issues/july-2014/working-class-what-working-class/>