



History Acts 24:

Labour & The Left – What Next?

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Activists: Becka Hudson (Fck Boris/Grime4Corbyn), Sophie Wilson (Labour/Acorn Sheffield), Chris Peace (Labour/Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign)

Historians: John Callaghan (Salford), Barnaby Raine (Columbia)

Key questions:

- What ideological and practical balances are to be struck when engaging in party politics to support local organising?
- How do we address the burden on activists and organisers and the tendency of party politics to outsource this work into communities?
- How can we support community organising in places where people feel unsupported? What should Labour be doing to offer its support?
- What has been the effect of changes in the composition of the working class and traditional Labour areas? How can socialist organising and policies appeal to and include these constituencies, and what should Labour do to improve its recognition and representation of them?
- How can we reshape the links between community organising, activist campaigns, and party political structures and strengthen the influence of community campaigns on party strategy? How can we ensure that important campaign aims and priorities are not lost in the shaping of party strategy?

Chair Steffan Blayney opened the session with a reminder that Labour and the Left have been the subject of History Acts meetings twice before. The first History Acts session discussed 'Labour's Crisis' in 2015, while History Acts 8 in 2018 discussed 'Labour and Momentum: the Left in government?'. This session will explore what is and should be next for Labour and the Left.

With reference to her own campaigning, Becka Hudson explained how she saw Labour's role under Jeremy Corbyn, and what it might go on to look like. She is currently working against excesses in the criminal justice system including racist policing and human rights abuses, and prior to this campaigned on housing issues. These campaigns are extra-parliamentary and community-based, not working within a party structure but built on mutual support between campaign groups and the party where relevant. She noted that Labour has not always been an ally: she identified Tony Blair's legacy in racist policing and pointed out that many housing activists in London have mobilised against the actions of Labour councillors. Her campaigns for Corbyn and against Boris Johnson have not been led by Labour members but by community activism with a focus on supporting community members and building community power. This campaign work has included mass voter registration, food bank collections, and fundraising for community groups such as [ACCOUNT Hackney](#). The grassroots nature of these campaigns meant that they relied on activists' contributions between other commitments. The campaigns' relationship with Labour has been guided by a search for allies to support communities in what moves them.

Without being dogmatic about working with Labour or not, Becka stated that she does not see the Labour party becoming a mass people's organisation. It is important to remain clear-eyed about what is needed to address the growing social, economic, and climate crises and how organisations across society can contribute. This power must be built from the ground up, and the Left must continue to do this. She pointed to the narrow presidential election victory for Joe Biden in the US as a warning for Labour if Keir Starmer persists with the current trend of law-and-order politics. Corbyn and especially his anti-racist policies were a sign of hope for many young voters, and their call for change should be heard.

Sophie Wilson described the impact of Corbyn on her own political involvement. Her life experiences made her political but after Corbyn's leadership election she saw a politics for a fairer society enter the mainstream without pandering to the Right or middle ground for votes. Her story of political involvement is mirrored by many others. In 2019 she became the Labour candidate for Rother Valley, where she grew up. The constituency, which includes Orgreave, was severely damaged by neoliberalism and the policies of Margaret Thatcher. The seat was lost by Labour for the first time in 2019; the elected Tory MP is from London and rarely visited the constituency. Sophie suggested that it may have been precisely the damage done to the area that made it elect a Tory candidate, as conditions locally are not set up to fight. For instance, the Miners' Welfare community spaces have been sold off by the trust that owned them, leaving the community without a base to meet and organise. Young people are leaving the area and many are struggling. Instead of focusing on changing this, Labour has been taking the seat for granted. While the issue of Brexit came up on every doorstep as an anti-establishment focal point, Labour sat on fence on the issue. Sophie noted that Momentum's base is focused in metropolitan student areas, and that different campaign strategies are needed in Red Wall seats. These areas are necessary to win in the first-past-the-post model, and neglecting them has been a significant mistake for Labour and the Left. Community organising is the way forward to build a voter base for the next election; it is important to respond to the immediate crisis but also to plan long-term for political victory.

Sophie gave the example of her own involvement in Acorn, which fights campaigns on everyday issues through collective action. Their recent focus has been on housing and renters' rights and their activism includes preventing evictions through collective action. The successes achieved this way help people to see that change is possible.

Chris Peace was the Labour candidate for North-East Derbyshire, another former Labour seat which elected a Tory MP in 2017. Her parents' generation saw Labour introduce the welfare state. As a teenager she experienced the Miners' Strike, when the whole community supported the union. In her view the strike is not history; people were aware at the time that it was about the ideological destruction of organised labour to support the subsequent move to privatisation. The pandemic has highlighted how privatisation will always put profit over people. Chris initially saw her own activist role outside the party, organising in her workplace as a teacher and later a Legal Aid solicitor. She joined the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign because of her own background and her experience of injustice in the criminal justice and policing systems.

Although she has been disappointed by the loss of two elections and the change in party leadership and direction, she called for the good points of the party to be kept. Voter numbers show that the electorate did not reject socialist policies wholesale in 2017 and 2019. The Orgreave campaign is strongly linked to what is going on in workplaces now as organised, skilled, decently-paid labour is replaced by zero-hours contracts. It is important to connect workplace and community organisation. Resisting exploitation within communities has an impact on what Labour will do. Parliament is not the driver of social change; it does not act until it is forced. While we must keep up pressure on MPs, the Labour party is its membership, and socialist policies will be maintained if this is a clear demand from members. We must show how we are addressing inequalities and making a difference in order to give people something to build their hopes on. For instance, the Orgreave campaign was not Labour policy, but through pressure it is now party policy to hold an enquiry. Similarly the investigation into spy cops was achieved through activist pressure. Chris called for all activists to scrutinise current policy on state interference in activist activities and state crimes against activist organisations.

John Callaghan is also from a Red Wall constituency in East Manchester. Growing up in the 1970s he witnessed the destruction of local industries and 'slum clearance' programmes. While this period coincided with the so-called 'Golden Age of Social Democracy', he pointed out, for how many years of this time was Labour actually in government? It is important not to romanticise the past: Labour's great electoral successes in this period were more precarious than they are generally presented. The majority of the British working class voted conservative in the crises of the earlier 20th century, such as the rise of fascism. We cannot assume that the working-class vote is automatically a Labour vote. Labour has never been very successful in winning general elections – it was most successful under Blair, who was most distant from socialism. It is therefore healthy for campaigners to fight for their direct causes and not to invest all their efforts in working with the Labour party, which risks reproducing the factions of the parliamentary party within activist groups. Since the Second World War almost all important new political ideas, policies, and campaigns have begun with pressure groups outside of parliament and new left movements almost always emerged from community politics such as feminist and anti-racist initiatives.

John challenged the idea of 'pessimistic nostalgia' in Red Wall areas including claims that the memory of decent jobs and community cohesion is linked to forms of masculine pride that are drawn to figures like Donald Trump. He pointed to 1959 when a third consecutive election loss for Labour led Hugh Gaitskill to conclude that the traditional working class was becoming more bourgeois and buying into Tory consumerism and to consider distancing the party from socialism and trade unionism. Five years later, however, Labour won under Harold Wilson and pointed to 13 wasted years under Tory government. It is important not to give up on our political goals; doing so would play into the hands of the Right.

Barnaby Raine stated that we have most to learn from activists, but hoped that historians could show what is new and what is not about the present political situation. He pointed out that the present has distinctive challenges. Between 2017 and 2019 pundits had to start taking socialism seriously; but it is dangerously seductive to see the potential election of Left politicians as a way of implementing change from above. Corbynism was an exceptional historical moment as it is so rare for a member from the Left wing of the party to rise to power within it. Socialism has always been placed at the margins of the party; the party narrative has suggested that the only reason not to alienate socialists is that they are necessary to achieve election victory. Barnaby described Corbynism as resulting from a series of other movements since 2010 including the student protests, Occupy, and pension strikes which were seen to have failed at the time but went on to have a huge impact on Corbyn's manifesto. Illusions of left reformism ignore how much politics relies on social movements rather than parliament.

Barnaby identified the existence of a party strategy for the Left as key. The party saw decades of paralysis on political strategy. Between 2017 and 19 there seemed to be a strategy represented for instance by John McDonnell's plans for the economy. Current moralistic positions on leaving or not leaving the party now indicate a lack of strategy again. It is important to consider the problems of class base and changing class composition and what they mean for where the Left's constituencies are. Labour's distance from its historical base allowed Brexit to create a split between working-class inner cities and the Red Wall. There was a failure to make consistent anti-racist and anti-systemic arguments.

In discussion participants asked how to grapple with the burdens and risks involved in community and union organising and the fact that they devolve on activists rather than on political party members. The panellists acknowledged that activists carry a heavy load, but pointed out that organisation works best and achieves most if it is realistic about its goals, is locally led, and works from the bottom up. Chris and Sophie were involved in the Sheffield Needs a Pay Rise campaign which is built on workplace canvassing and active inclusion of workers, including in unorganised workplaces. The campaign has achieved immediate victories through community support for worker initiatives. It is also key to celebrate the victories of other activists and campaigns and to offer support and solidarity to other campaigns.

Participants suggested the need to be more realistic about socialist policies within Labour. It was pointed out that many policies under Corbyn might be seen as social-democratic rather than socialist. In a historical context, most, such as free education, were basic rather than radical demands. The Labour party structure and trade union bureaucracy make it difficult to achieve any but incremental political shifts in the party. Participants warned that, if Labour wins under Starmer in 2024 it will inherit a huge economic crisis, and this will probably lead to punitive policies for the working class, in ways that Blair did not need to engage with in a better economic climate. John responded that centre-left parties like Labour were based on the idea that politics could be put in control of the economy, but that this required politicians to implement lasting changes while in government. Very few lasting structural changes were made under Blair, meaning that investment in areas such as education could be dismantled under austerity. He pointed out that the Left has no real strategy to tackle issues like tax evasion and growing inequality. These can only be addressed by collaboration, including across borders. John suggested that politicians should distance themselves from conceptions of parliamentary politics as career-driven and corrupt, focusing instead on scrupulousness and representation of voters. Sophie added that politicians need to identify the issues that matter most in communities, offer solidarity, and campaign on

these issues. 2024 should not be the end game: the party must organise for the future, thinking on a scale of the next two decades. She sees the party only as a vehicle to create the conditions for socialism and obtain societal consent to socialism. Thatcher was an example of a politician with long-term goals, the effects of which are still being felt in constituencies like Rother Valley and are still preventing effective organisation in these areas. Labour needs to be the vehicle that rights that wrong.

Participants called for Labour to involve itself in building unions. While the nature of the working class has changed, Labour and the unions have not adapted to the rise of precarity and of low pay in new white-collar professions such as IT which often lack organisation and representation. Sophie suggested that the Sheffield Needs a Pay Rise model seems applicable to these new industries as it shows the impact of collective action, including by mass unionisation. She proposed that MPs could donate part of their wage to unions in order to counteract distrust in politicians and perceptions of them as distanced from workers and local causes. Unions should rethink their funding of the Labour party and refocus their political efforts away from parliament and into local organising; this could help to rebuild trust in unions as well.

Participants addressed both the role of anti-imperialism in Labour politics and the party stance on the monarchy. Should the debate extend beyond borders, addressing not only what a Left government could do for Britain but what differences it might make globally? Becka argued that the Left lost its way when it became too focused on electoral calculations; a lot of support for Corbyn was linked to his anti-imperialist stance, but these points were often dropped in policy. This was a strategic mistake. Barnaby noted that British socialists tend to feel public opinion is against them regarding the monarchy's role in writing hierarchy, status, and inequality into British society. However, this is not an easy argument to have or one that should be prioritised as an easy fight to win.

It was acknowledged that Momentum has a strong base in cities. What can these groups do to support local organisation in other areas? Sophie and Chris suggested ways of offering external help when required. Most organising models do not address the incorporation of external supporters, but, while it is important that people from outside the area do not try to take over local campaigns, solidarity and support through sharing funds, resources, and skills is always welcome. It might be appropriate to bring knowledge from city centre community campaigns or to offer practical support, such as with IT skills. It would also be useful if organisations that cover a large area actively maintained their connections with the outskirts of these areas, as a central focus puts disproportionate pressure on organisers who are based at a distance and are expected, for instance, to travel to meetings.

At the close of the discussion the panel returned their concluding thoughts. Barnaby suggested there may be a strategic advantage to the present moment, when it is clear that the Left does not have many clear answers. Humility from all sides is in order as we acknowledge that no one, including the Labour party, has yet succeeded in building socialism in Britain. The models from which we still derive our strategies remain based on a 20th century context assuming particular conditions of economic and industrial growth. Since then both the composition of social classes and the potential for social-democratic change from the British state have changed. Chris advised everyone not to get caught up in energy traps, but to focus activity where you can have influence and to celebrate victories. Instead of relying on the Labour front bench to change politics, we should make them rely and act on what activists are doing. Trade unions and local trades councils are great spaces for collective action. Sophie agreed, pointing out that the past five years have seen important campaign successes. If the working class has changed, we should go back to our

communities to assess how it has changed and whom it now includes. It is important to identify the barriers that prevent progress and how we can change this. There is nothing wrong with working towards what seem to be small goals. Becka added that community organising is not an answer to an absence of strategy. This is a very volatile time politically, but there are strong signs of hope in developments like the mobilisation of Black Lives Matter during the pandemic. We must stay primed to see where change is achievable and how it will develop, setting realistic goals and investing our energy strategically. When people see that the Left offers a route to victory they will give their support.

Reading recommended by speakers:

- Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organising for Power in the New Gilded Age* (Oxford University Press, 2016, 2018)