

Labour Movement

Jeremy Corbyn MP

Labour's leader addressed the Scottish Trades Union Congress when it met in Glasgow in December 2015. The Conservative Government, elected in May 2015, has prioritised its Trade Union Bill, which severely curtails day-to-day trade union activity in the workplace while also threatening their funding and that of the Labour Party, to which many unions are affiliated.

You've already heard a lot about the details in this [Trade Union] Bill, which has passed through the House of Commons. Only the House of Lords stands in the way of the Bill becoming law.

We already have the most restrictive labour laws in Europe. They are now moving beyond restricting trade unions, they are trying to take away your voice for good.

Labour opposed this Bill in the Commons and our peers will oppose it in the Lords. I have to tell you, in all likelihood, the Bill will become law – and we will have to adapt to the new realities it brings. But amid those new realities, there is an eternal truth – politics is about power.

The word 'democracy' itself contains that concept. It is a portmanteau of two Greek words: '*demos*' meaning 'the people', and '*kratos*' meaning 'to rule' or 'to have power'. So democracy means 'the people have the power'. That is, 'the people have power', not the Tories in Westminster, not the suits in the boardrooms, not the billionaires ensconced in their tax havens. You, the people.

But we only realise our power, when we stand together as one. Socialist politics are about forcing unaccountable power to be accountable and about stripping the unaccountable of their power.

Millions of people face unaccountable power every day. At work in their workplace – the boss, the management. They're not elected by the workforce; they cannot be voted out. They are appointed by those with money. They set your pay, whether you have a pension, your working hours, your working conditions. You the trade unions

were founded to rebalance that power – to organise people together to fight for their rights.

The co-operative movement – the other historic part of our Labour Movement – was also established to say ‘there is a different way’, that there is value in every worker and every voice in the workplace. People find it when they are sacked without reason; when they cannot afford a lawyer to defend them in court; or when they are sanctioned at the jobcentre.

They want you to know your place, do what you’re told without thinking or questioning, to like it or lump it. They have the power and you must accept it.

Our Labour Movement was formed to fight that powerlessness, to put power in the hands of the worker, and of all people. It is not only at work that people feel this powerlessness. People feel it when they can’t get a permanent home; because of a lack of council housing or because buy-to-let landlords have turned housing from the many finding a home, into an investment opportunity for a few. Now the Tories are forcing councils to sell off good quality council housing – stealing homes for families forever, socially cleansing our cities. It is the new Enclosure Acts, saying this area is not for the likes of you.

We built on our own institutions like the Workers’ Educational Association, in 1903 – which still delivers over 14,000 courses a year in England and Scotland. And it was a Labour government that created the Open University. Education is a right, not a privilege, and it must remain so. We must protect our schools, our colleges and our universities. Education is about us liberating our minds and liberating ourselves.

We founded the welfare state – the Attlee Government inheriting a national debt four times the size that Osborne inherited in 2010.

It created the National Health Service, built hundreds of thousands of council homes, and introduced the social security system.

Today, the welfare state doesn’t feel like a safety net, but a rope trap ... conditionality and sanctions, a government that labels and condemns, and a welfare state that acts as a sticking plaster for low pay, for high rents, and for a lack of affordable childcare.

If we look back in our history, it was the Labour Movement that fought for the right to vote – to extend it to the working class, and to women. Today, the Tories are trying to weaken those bonds, they are trying to remove 1 million people from the electoral records by rushing through individual electoral registration. They know who this will affect: the young, insecure workers, black and minority ethnic (BME) communities – the people least likely to vote Tory.

These gains were built by Labour governments or the pressure of the Labour Movement. Today, those bonds are being renewed. Last month, the Fire Brigades Union voted to reaffiliate to Labour. But even as those bonds are being renewed, the Tories' Trade Union Bill is trying to break them by cutting off trade union funding to the Labour Party.

Whether it's the trade unions, the Labour Party, the welfare state, or public services like colleges or the health and safety executive, these institutions are under attack because they are the basis of your power. We as the Labour Movement have to take a new approach. The Labour Movement, the trade unions and the next Labour government, working together to:

- eradicate the scourge of in-work poverty;
- repeal this Bill, and go further by setting out a positive charter of employment rights, for all workers, that apply from day one;

By doing so we can tackle the exploitative casualisation of the workforce, and make work a source of security.

I was elected on a platform of extending democracy in every part of the country and every part of society – giving people a real say in their communities and workplaces, breaking open the closed circle of Westminster and Whitehall, and yes, of boardrooms, too.

We are setting up a commission for workplace rights. It will be led by my shadow minister for trade unions, the former President of the National Union of Mineworkers, Ian Lavery MP.

Not only will we repeal the Trade Union Bill when we get back in 2020, we will also extend people's rights in the workplace – and give employees a real voice in the organisations they work for. That means new trade union freedoms and collective bargaining rights, of course, because it is only through collective representation that workers have the voice and the strength to reverse the race to the bottom in pay and conditions.

The Tories are determined to tip the scales still further in the direction of the employer. That same rigging of workplace power is what has led directly to the explosion in executive pay and boardroom excess, while low wages and insecure employment have mushroomed under Cameron.

So what about giving every employee a real democratic say on executive pay? And what about transparency of pay, conditions, investment and employment decisions – to give employees and trade unions the means to have real influence over the crucial decisions that affect people's working lives?

We want your input as we draw up policy for the world of work fit for the 21st century. Over half of the 422,000 people who voted in the Labour leadership election voted online, and even the Tories used online voting to

select their London mayoral candidate. But they don't want [trade unions] to have equal rights to do the same – one rule for them and another for us. We will also modernise trade union balloting. Trade unions should be allowed to ballot their members online and securely in their workplace.

The Tories boast that there are record numbers in employment. But don't just look at the quantity of that employment, but the quality, too. It is no coincidence that the quality of jobs has declined as trade union membership has also declined – more shackles on unions means fewer protections at work.

It is no coincidence that productivity has declined as trade union strength has weakened. Trade unions force employers to invest in their workplace and their workforce – unionised workplaces mean greater job security, and if workers are staying then employers invest in them.

We also need to redouble our efforts to promote equality – to reduce and eradicate the gender pay gap. Partly, that is about stopping discrimination against women workers and, partially, about ensuring an equality of status and pay for the sectors in which women workers dominate – care, cleaning and catering.

It is our movement, the Labour Movement, that challenged this way of thinking, that found practical solutions to this wielding of power. It was Labour's Barbara Castle who started that process with the Equal Pay Act, 45 years ago. It's time it was implemented by all employers in the spirit in which it was intended.

We founded the trade unions to bring people together in their workplace to provide a counterweight to the power of the owners and to management. The Tory party was founded when working class people didn't have the vote. The Tories' purpose remains to keep power from the majority; they believe they have a divine right to rule, that the powers of heredity and patronage exemplified by the House of Lords should remain; that the only wealth creators are billionaire tax dodgers.

After the travesty of the Poll Tax, the Labour government delivered devolution, which has meant you as a country can make different choices – over tuition fees, over prescription charges, and free social care for older people. Democracy means you can make different choices based on your values. We as the Labour Movement always fight for the extension of democracy at every level and in every sphere. That is the historic mission of the Labour Movement, to share power in more and more hands. They want to restrict it in fewer and fewer hands.

Scotland is imbued with this history, inspirational figures like Keir Hardie and Jimmy Reid, and by your actions throughout history. Those

who went to fight fascism in the Spanish Civil War, those coalfield communities in Fife who took in Chilean families fleeing the tyranny of Pinochet, and in East Kilbride where 4,000 trade unionists at Rolls Royce refused to handle Pinochet's engines meant for jets to crush the Chilean people; in your support for the anti-apartheid movement, commemorated in Mandela Place in this city. That is solidarity in action, and it is our Labour Movement history.

When you act together in solidarity, when we realise our collective power, then we stop being individuals who get things done to us; we become a force that can make choices and determine our own destiny.

We say austerity is a political choice, not an economic necessity, because it is true and it is empowering. It is not inevitable, it is something that can be resisted and stopped.

For workers and trade unions, too, the rate of technological advance can be disorientating and a threat to jobs. But why should it be? Why isn't it the case that making labour less intensive, making our work easier, is something we all share in? Why is it only the bosses who benefit by reducing costs or making higher profits?

There is a better way. The best way to get job security, get a pay rise, or win equal pay is through well-organised unions in every workplace. You are the most effective on the Tories' austerity agenda. But you also stand in the way of their plans for privatisation. This Tory government wants to sell the goods and services we have collectively built over generations. They want to row back every gain that we have made together. But we can resist and we can defeat them.

I want to pay tribute to all the Labour-led local authorities who have promised not to assist in the draconian attacks this Trade Union Bill represents. I have really enjoyed working with Kezia [Dugdale, the Scottish Labour Party Leader] on these issues, and I'd like to congratulate all the Labour councillors who have led the way to ensure non-cooperation with the Trade Union Bill.

The spirit of resistance and rebellion is what won us democracy, it is what built trade unions, it is what will enable us to see off austerity and this Tory government. The slogans of our movement are not the empty slogans – they are truths learned in struggle. United we stand, divided we fall, unity is strength, the workers united will never be defeated. We will defeat this government, we will defeat austerity, we will repeal this Bill and, together, we can and we will build a better society.