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*Ideas into Action:*  
*Building the Open Left*

Open Labour draft position paper 2017

# *Ideas into Action: Building the Open Left*

Welcome to the founding conference of Open Labour. This document is our first 'position paper' and will be voted on in parts and as a whole by the conference. It provides a report on our initial activity, an idea of our political positioning and some guiding principles, some initial policy positions on the big questions of the day, and a statement of aims for the year ahead.

Open Labour is a transparent and democratic organisation which will seek mandates from members for its key decisions via this document. Additions and amendments can be submitted until 12PM on March 4<sup>th</sup>. These will be arranged by number and circulated to attendees by email (as will this paper – hard copies will only be provided on advanced request). Submissions must be made to **admin@openlabour.org** – please make specific reference by section to where you would want your changes to take effect.

Further to this we will also use the conference to announce the results of our first Management Committee (MC) elections. This body will take over from our present steering committee and steer the organisation based on this paper, or on the basis of online ballots where it deems them appropriate.

Present members of the steering committee will be available on the day or may be contacted by email if you need assistance – admin@openlabour.org.

## *Open Labour steering committee 2015-17*

Tom Miller and Bev Craig (Co-chairs), Rose Grayston (Secretary), Alex Sobel (Treasurer), Jade Azim (Editor), Tom Williams (Membership), Ann Black, George Lindars-Hammond, Yue Ting Cheng, Andy Howell, Kaveh Azarhoosh, JoAnne Rust, David Hamblin, Craig Dawson.



*For our first year the steering committee extend our special thanks to: Steve Yemm, Charlotte Nichols, Sara T'Rula, Alby Earley, Emma Burnell, Andy Flanagan, Jo Ingold, Matt Donoghue, James Stafford, Renewal Journal, NEON, Compass, Tribune group of MPs, Labour Together, Peter Hain, Kate Green MP, Lou Haigh MP, Ed Miliband MP, Lisa Nandy MP, Clive Lewis MP, Jon Trickett MP, Tom Watson MP, Jim McMahon MP, Chi Onwurah MP.*

Open Labour launched in November 2015 with an open letter to the Guardian. The aim was to bring together the so called 'soft left' of the Labour Party.

This part of our party represents a large number of members and supporters but has been poorly organised for some years. Its thinking draws on an older tradition on the Labour left, rooted in the heritage of Bevanism – a socialist tradition which is rooted in the labour movement, adaptable and serious about power.

We seek to bring organisation and discipline to this political tradition. In launching Open Labour we are also seeking to overcome reliance on the past, and to recast the soft left in a forward looking way around the ethos of openness – 'the open left'.

We have launched as a grassroots based movement outside Westminster to challenge reliance on the workings of the Westminster bubble and the politics of celebrity.

Open Labour will also challenge the traditional activist left of the party to become less orthodox and unyielding, more focussed on how the world and society is changing, and to make an understanding of power and trust building key to its creed. We must act on the urgent need to win over, not simply shout over, those who disagree with us.

Our immediate priority has been to begin a debate on what the Labour left can look like if it becomes more flexible, pluralist, and focussed on alliance building.

Early on we established a steering committee, a website and a mailing list.

We have since run a series of regional meetings on Labour's policies and political strategy in Sheffield, Manchester, Birmingham and Liverpool. We are planning further regional meetings in Cardiff, Bath and London for the year ahead. These will feed into a wider process outline in our aims for the year.

This year also saw our first Labour Party Conference event in Liverpool. Featuring Clive Lewis, Lou Haigh, Ed Miliband, Kate Green, Chi Onwurah and Jim McMahon, this event developed Open Labour's relationships with MPs and members.

Much of this year has been about getting off the ground – putting basic systems in place and bringing together the core support of the open left with around 1500 supporters identified. Alongside this, we have provided a rallying point for those who feel alienated by the intolerance and inflexibility which has emerged in too much of our party.

The accompanying statement of aims for the year ahead aims to build on this by turning ideas into action and building our organising power. It sets a path for us to develop policy to take into party debate. It outlines a plan for making our voice clearer in party debates, finding our allies, and most importantly, building on the ground. This process needs to be adequately funded, and it must be member led.

Our party and the democratic left across the western world is in crisis. We need energy and ideas to shape an optimistic future. *Action is the antidote to despair.*



## Political position 2017-18

It is crucial that the Labour Party offers a credible and popular alternative to austerity cuts and neoliberalism. These trends have represented the biggest transfer of wealth and power from poor and middle-income households to the rich elite in living memory.

The private sector's own dynamism is failing. Productivity is falling internationally, but especially in Britain where the course Theresa May has laid out will further concentrate wealth and opportunity in the South while neglecting every other part of our country.

Wealthy and powerful interests are now building a kind of 'tollbooth politics' built on rents, private debt, financial complexity and at times corrupt practices – we end up paying for nothing.

The spoils of this tollbooth go to the gatekeepers of the new stagnant economy, not to those creating value.

Social mobility and equal chances, values with huge support across the country, are being set back to the Victorian age. These are problems which a Tory Brexit will lock in, especially if the economy is not reshaped and rebalanced.

This stagnation process has predictably become cemented as a 'new normal' in public debate. Labour must take on the challenge of forging a compelling and credible alternative, capable of shifting mainstream opinion.

### ***Economic liberalism: a broken bargain***

Increasingly citizens feel like the bargain they have been offered by politicians for decades is being broken. Increasing wealth. Dignified jobs. Stability. The chance to get on in life. These things are no longer delivered by Britain's political consensus.

Changing this depends on gaining trust to govern, but unlike when the process of globalisation was in an earlier stage, Labour cannot avoid challenging the terms of debate. A new consensus is therefore required from the left around key shared values and principles. These include:

- Equality and human dignity
- Solidarity and community
- Autonomy and liberation
- Respect for the environment

Each of these ideas can form the basis of greater consensus on the left – but they can also win people over who are not yet supporters of the left or Labour. Our policies and campaigns must be framed in a way which is trusted and persuasive.

### **A social alliance for Labour**

The party must retain the trust of core voters whilst regaining previously Labour support. In short, it must become trusted by workers from a range of social backgrounds to be the centre of a new social alliance, spanning traditional supporters in areas of industry and ex industry, upwardly mobile workers in the South East and progressive voters in large cities and university towns.

### **Getting the basics right**

Building an alliance of support is no mean feat, but it is the only way forward and Labour must get in shape to deliver it.

We therefore call on the Labour Party to adopt some broad operating principles of its own. We believe that without these, no left leadership can be successful.

- Work out which voters are the people we want to add to our existing support, and which areas of public opinion we need to respond to. Have a political strategy. No tactic can be successful without being part of one.
- Give greater voice to those 'left behind' in modern Britain, whether white British coastal workers, coalfield communities, those trapped in the "gig" economy or EU immigrants paying tax here.
- Operate as a 'plural party', creating a culture of respectful and tolerant debate.
- Organise at community level with far greater involvement from trade unions and cooperatives.

- Ruthlessly professionalise Labour's parliamentary and press operations, from the leadership down. Train and develop our membership.

- Speak in a language that people understand using arguments which are well tested and have broad support or persuasive appeal. Make sure our ideas are clear and honest in how they seek to bring change.

- Identify and avoid marginal positions in favour of what we can win and also need to win. Concentrate on changing consensus on the most important areas of economic and social debate.



*"The language of  
priorities is the  
religion of  
socialism"*

Nye Bevan

## **Policy statements**

### **For working people, against hard Brexit**

The Labour Party is instinctively open and internationalist, and so is Open Labour. The public narrowly voted to leave the European Union following a campaign in which many 'out' proponents states that strong trade and economic ties with the EU would remain in place. In both ways, this is obviously not a mandate for hard Brexit – Labour must make this a political question. If Brexit is to take place, we believe that Labour should use all means available firstly to guarantee all workers living in the UK the same rights and entitlements as those remaining in the EU. Secondly, Labour must argue for partnerships with our neighbouring countries to tackle cross border challenges such as climate change and the refugee crisis.

Nevertheless, it is important that we as the Labour Party face up to the many reasons why people chose to do this. These are material, emotional, and policy based. They include living in areas with poor opportunities to get on and make a decent living, but also frustration at the impact of immigration. They include insecurity about identity in Britain. They include a feeling of a lack of control over life and politics, and neglect by the political establishment. Keeping our values firm does not mean we ignore these voices. To the contrary, it must embolden us to have a meaningful dialogue and offer solutions that challenge establishment narratives and which can move post-industrial areas in particular towards a more hopeful future.

We accept the verdict of the referendum and it is important that Labour is not seen to ignore democracy. But this does not mean that Labour can ignore the real risks presented by Theresa May's Brexit – democracy needs public opinion to be led as well as followed. Nor does it mean that the narrow majority for Brexit will always reflect the electorate. Therefore we agree with Labour Party Conference's decision in 2016 to remain open to a return to the EU, should majority public support for this start to become clear over time, and the terms favourable for British residents. We believe that with such a policy, Labour could lead a process of national healing.

There are immediate priorities to address; in particular, the current threat to our trading will hit jobs, pay and conditions in manufacturing and logistics. Labour must maintain favourable market and customs arrangements with the EU, an economic bloc on our doorstep with more power than the United States, as its first priority. We must agitate for a strategy which returns to manufacturing and trade, rather than the 'tollbooth' option of becoming a tax haven for global elites. An open approach to trade supported by an interventionist industrial strategy is essential if the country is to return to production and productivity.

The threat to the human rights of workers in Britain is also of particular concern. Britain should remain a member of the ECHR, and the Human Rights Act must be defended as part of UK law. We also give our unconditional support and solidarity to people working here in accordance with the law. Labour must call for the immediate guarantee of permanent residency or citizenship status for these nationals, and press the government hard for guarantees.

## **Progressive alliance**

Open Labour takes a mature approach to working with people who disagree with us, and notes that Labour have delivered several very successful governments with parties in Scotland and Wales. Labour has also worked well in coalition in Councils across the country, and had a close relationship with colleagues from other parties in the London Assembly. Labour should remain open-minded towards coalitions and alliances where these are the best option, and should constantly draw in the best ideas wherever we find them.

However, we are more than just "not Tories". The Labour Party has always itself been a progressive coalition, in which diverse groups come together around a common platform, becoming stronger and more compelling for it. If we are to offer a clear, radical and credible vision to the electorate, we cannot dilute our message by tying ourselves to parties who do not share our answers to the biggest economic and social challenges we face. It is clear that any proposed electoral alliance between a 'left bloc' of parties would still be far too small to defeat its counterparts on the right, but would be beholden to parties of a marginality which has meant that they have never challenged for government on their own (and in some cases would not value the prospect).

An electoral deal involving the SNP whilst it embraces a hard nationalism (as opposed to a federal solution) for Scotland could only last until their goal would be achieved. It is also completely unclear that the Lib Dems possess the political credentials to be considered a progressive party in any sense. The Tory Government they placed in office and propped up oversaw a massive transfer of wealth to the rich and powerful. Their new leadership is on record as saying they would happily repeat such a deal, even given the cost to the country which the last one made clear. We do not believe that this indicates progressive politics – the record of the austerity coalition should not be forgotten quickly.

Finally, our electoral system does not allow for transferable voting, so any coalition would mean party elites restricting choice both for members of the voting and for local activists, who surely deserve some level of democracy and respect from their political parties. Alliances between progressive parties should be based on open principles and common agendas - not dictating voting choices to the public, or foisting national deals on local activists without their consent.

For these reasons we believe that Labour should be open to offers of joint policy work, demonstrations or campaigns alongside other parties, and publicly ready to discuss coalitions with non-right wing parties after elections have passed. However, Labour must oppose any electoral deal until the considerable objections can be resolved by proponents of this kind of alliance.

Further, we note that calling for support of other parties against Labour candidates remains a disciplinary offence in the party rule book, as democratically agreed. Our candidates are democratically selected by our members and deserve their support. If we are to concentrate on building alliances and blocs, it should be first and foremost between the ever more mutually distant sections of low and mid-earning voters, with Labour itself as the host venue.

## **Mass, democratic and plural – the party we need**

Open Labour resents the hollowing of the Labour Party and disenfranchisement of its membership during the New Labour years and welcome the huge influx of new members the party has seen since 2010 and especially 2015, especially where joiners are new to political participation. We are committed to integrating and supporting these new members.

We call for the return of policy making powers to member and affiliate-based structures, with conference as the final arbiter of both standing policy and election platforms. We believe that there is far greater space for unions and socialist societies to be given power as a stabilising influence in the centre of the party, and would favour their re-inclusion as part of an electoral college, as well as an enhanced role for affiliated members in local CLPs.

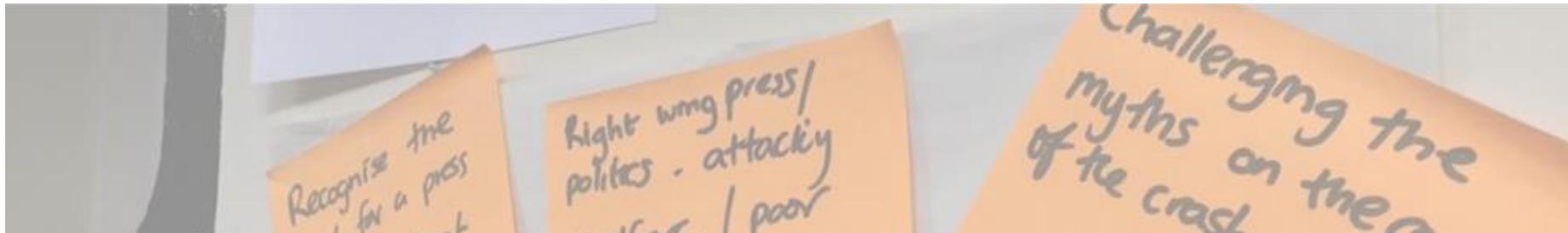
In addition to this however, there is also a role for professional policy staff in a support capacity to this process, and a re-imagining is viable. Labour must take this path back towards being a democratic and participative party.

Everyone entitled to Labour membership must have the right and the ability to participate, or our democracy cannot sustain itself. Open Labour unreservedly condemns the recent trend among a minority of activists of calling for members on opposing wings of the party to leave. We also feel that new members are getting a raw deal - new members should receive induction and support from fellow members and expect those who are already part of Labour to make efforts to properly integrate them. We expect Labour's staff to facilitate this process.

The party as a whole is suffering from a deteriorating culture – in addition to greater support for new members it needs to investigate ideas such as a code of conduct for members and new formats of running meetings or making policy.

We feel that it is important that members are comfortable with the party as a whole, particularly with the idea of it being a wide formation which represents the whole of the working class and its political allies. The left's efforts to win debates on policy and political strategy should not come at the cost of other traditions freely participating in the party's affairs. We stand for a pluralist left and for internal tolerance of our traditions. Without these, open debate is impossible - they are essential elements of and genuinely democratic left.

## Statement of aims: 2017-18



This statement will shape and guide the new Management Committee (to be elected at the Annual General Meeting) for the year ahead, ensuring that their priorities are membership led and accountable, making sure that the politics of the Open Labour translate into action.

### Aims

- Define and highlight the values and principles of the open left and promote them in the party
- Build Open Labour's organisational strength to a point where it can freely choose to fight, negotiate or compromise
- Win influence in the party and movement for our politics

Outcome	Targets
<i>Grow our base</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Increase supporters number to 5000 and paying members to 1000</li><li>• Produce and deliver a social media outreach strategy to increase awareness of Open Labour and drive membership</li><li>• Make contact with friendly MPs and start a regular mailing list</li><li>• Start a youth section, if deemed necessary by young members by the time of our policy conference</li><li>• Ensure we have members right across UK and that our members and that our MC reflects the UK's diversity</li><li>• Being mailing lists for attendees of regional events, so that they can run events locally</li><li>• Identify key allies in other Labour and progressive organisations and initiate regular contact with them</li></ul>
<i>Secure resources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All funding to be clear, publicly available and transparent</li><li>• Raise income including 1 medium grant</li><li>• Gain a funded campaign arrangement from at least 1 TUC affiliated trade union</li></ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transition to NationBuilder for our web offer and relationship management</li> <li>• Audit and consolidate our data (including a youth audit)</li> </ul>
<i>Get organised</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose a priority campaign by online ballot</li> <li>• Plan a joint campaign with a trade union on Brexit or EU workers</li> <li>• Organise at least 3 further regional meetings</li> <li>• Create mailing lists for all who have attended regional meetings</li> <li>• Run an annual party conference event</li> <li>• Scope internal elections readiness and begin negotiations with other stakeholders, where deemed appropriate by the MC</li> <li>• </li> </ul>
<i>Ideas into Policy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of Strategy Working Groups. These will engage members, politicians, academics and experts, and be chaired by Management Committee members or appropriate invitees. The groups will tackle the headline policy and political strategy challenges of the democratic left, and include among them a group aimed at creating a more collaborative and tolerant political culture in the party.</li> <li>• Present the findings of these working groups in accessible reports with dissemination plans</li> <li>• Hold an annual Policy Conference outside of London, in order to produce policy for our members to take through Labour's formal processes</li> <li>• Take motions to conference through CLPs where our membership is active.</li> <li>• Produce a short Open Labour 'book of ideas' by our next policy conference</li> </ul>
<i>Take action</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organise campaign days across the country for key elections</li> <li>• Produce a guide to improving your CLP, for a national road show (6 CLPs min)</li> <li>• Produce policy papers from working groups and distribute widely</li> <li>• Have a national motion for CLPs on our priority campaign</li> <li>• Fight for conference motion</li> <li>• Gain wider promotion of our work including press, TV, external blogs etc</li> <li>• Make a newsworthy intervention on at least 1 national issue</li> <li>• Promote allied organisations or those likely to share or amplify our voice on key issues</li> <li>• Support and take action for major labour movement demonstrations and industrial action</li> </ul>