

Funding the Future

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There are occasions when politicians baffle me. I will exclude Tories from that comment: their very existence is hard to explain. I refer instead to those from other parties. Like Keir Starmer, in particular.

Starmer has three jobs. He has to lead the Labour Party. If he has not noticed it, this was and is rooted in the labour movement, as represented by trade unions. As such it is his job to represent the political interests of working people.

Second, he has to oppose the government. This is a necessary part of holding the title of Leader of the Opposition - for which he does receive an official salary. The key to this role is also in the name: the job is to oppose the government by pointing out its failing.

Third, and to fulfil the objectives of the first two roles, his job is to win the next general election and then form a government. Again, without wishing to point out the obvious, this requires that in a two party system he wins mass popular support.

Right now Keir Starmer is being assisted by three things. The first is that working people are united in their concern about a cost of living crisis that can only be addressed through fair pay rises to ensure that people can continue to pay their bills as they fall due. There is nothing especially difficult to understand about this. If costs rise - as energy will - by more than £2,000 in a year and many other expenses, such as those on food, are also rising rapidly then either people without savings (which is most people in the country) get a fair pay rise or they will fall into debt, go hungry, go cold or go bankrupt and lose their homes. This is the reality of life. There is no avoiding it. That is what is going to happen. As a result there is an extraordinary unity amongst working people demanding action, including now a call for a general strike.

Second, the Tories are in total disarray, with the two leadership election candidates suggesting that their task is to get the country out of the mess that the governments of which they were members have gotten us into.

Third, as a result getting people to agree that we need a different government should be easy.

But then we have to take the Starmer factor into account. Let's just look at yesterday. The rail unions are on strike, led by the extraordinary Mick Lynch, who has an innate ability to explain economics (and other realities) which almost no interviewer knows how to handle. That is helped by the fact that his case is a simple one. He is saying a 4% pay rise is inadequate when the cost of living is increasing by 10% or more, and prices will not go down again even if inflation does sometime in 2023. And he is right, of course.

Lynch is also right to ask questions about why it is that working people are being picked on when rents, profits and interest are all still being paid, without question arising as to why they too should not be squeezed.

If Starmer was seeking to represent labour as leader of the Labour Party you would have thought these might be positions that he should support. But no. He says it's his job as prime minister in waiting to support the management in disputes and not to side with labour, because he will be the manager if he (ever) secures office.

It's a crass argument. Firstly, that ignores the fact that he has to win office. At this moment that means he has to show he is on the side of those who are going to be crushed by the coming winter. They are his voter base. He cannot afford to alienate them.

Second, it's a crass argument because part of his pitch should be that the current management have got their negotiating position wrong and that he would not in any way have supported the offer now being made to the rail workers, which is so obviously unfair. Saying so is exactly what his job should involve.

And third, what this reveals is a man who thinks he can only become prime minister by appealing to small-minded right-wingers. He is indifferent about representing anyone from the left, or what they stand for. Maybe, as a lot of Labour MPs and some Labour peers are saying, that is because he really does not know what life is like for anyone but those who are on the right wing of politics. Or maybe it's because he really does think that all politics is now on the right anyway, and the left does not matter. And maybe it is because he just does not care as he wants to govern from the right, come what may. To be honest, I can't tell.

But what I do know is that a leader of the Labour Party who has forgotten what the party is meant to represent, just as he has forgotten that it is his job to oppose. He also seems intent on alienating a great many of those who might support him. That makes him look a pretty dismal failure at his job.

No wonder the Labour Party has no one out on the morning media round as I write this. Starmer's actions are indefensible. I suspect his shadow cabinet know it. It's hard to see how he can continue like this.

What a mess.