

Labour's John McDonnell mounts Stalinist platform to misrepresent Marx

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Labour Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell attended a Marx memorial event alongside various Stalinist politicians and academics to deliver a speech of pure political charlatanism.

Speaking at the closing session of “Marx 200,” McDonnell attempted to claim Marxism for the supposedly “broad church” of the Labour Party before presenting a distortion of the revolutionary thinker suited to the lukewarm Keynesianism of Jeremy Corbyn.

Far from warning the ruling class to “tremble at a Communist revolution,” in the words of the *Communist Manifesto*, McDonnell invited them to join him in politely discussing Marx's ideas—presumably over tea and biscuits—as part of his charm offensive in the City of London.

His attendance was predictably greeted by right-wing media diatribes denouncing him as a communist wolf in sheep's clothing. But these responses figured directly into McDonnell's political calculations. He even opened his speech at the event with reference to the “inevitable... lurid headlines.”

McDonnell is very aware that the political temper of many workers and young people to whom Corbyn is appealing is militant, anti-austerity and often anti-capitalist. He described the “new 21st century” as one in which society “is scarred by grotesque levels of inequality and grotesque levels of poverty.” It is essential, therefore, that the pro-capitalist measures and minimal reforms he advances are cloaked in the borrowed authority of Marx.

Such was the intention behind McDonnell's inclusion of Marx's ideas in the “wide range of multiple streams of thought” in which “the ideas and philosophy of the Labour Party and British Socialism have had their genesis.”

This is a falsification. Marxism has never found a home in the Labour Party, which has always regarded Marxism and communism with naked hostility. Among the other “streams of thought” listed were Marxism's bitter opponents, the Fabians Beatrice and Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw. It was their ideas—along with those of conservative trade union leaders—which had the real influence in the formation of the Labour Party and which isolated and eventually pressured the early Marxist Social Democratic Foundation out of the Labour Representation Committee.

From its formation in 1920, the Communist Party of Great Britain was repeatedly denied affiliation to Labour. Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) members, even in the period of its Stalinists degeneration, had to join individually, and only then to

utilise their left credentials to present Labour as the vehicle for traveling the reformist “British Road to Socialism.”

This role as political apologists for Labour's pro-capitalist programme and leadership is the “Marxist tradition” to which McDonnell defers. The same holds true for the Militant Tendency, where he began his career. Its 35 years of entry in the Labour Party centred on making the same claim as the Stalinists: that Labour could be transformed into a genuinely socialist party. Even then, this was met with expulsions in the 1980s that finally forced the Militant Tendency to become an open external party.

Most telling of all was the attitude of Labour to the genuine Trotskyists who maintained a presence within the party via the semi-clandestine entry group, the Club, led by Gerry Healy. Its members were subjected to increasingly severe witch hunts. The Trotskyists, who were winning increased support, waged a counter-offensive by founding the Socialist Labour League in 1959. The SLL applied to the Labour Party for political affiliation and was rejected, proscribed and dozens of its leading personnel, including Healy, expelled.

At the 1964 conference of the party's youth wing, the Young Socialists, the Trotskyists organised behind the journal *Keep Left* won a majority and passed resolutions demanding that an incoming Labour government carry out socialist policies. Labour leader Harold Wilson responded by closing down YS branches and expelling *Keep Left* supporters.

McDonnell's political purpose in invoking Marx was made clear in his favourable citing of a supposed “21st century version” of the *Communist Manifesto* published by two *Financial Times* writers—a partner in a corporate advisory firm and a professor of law and finance—as evidence of Marxism's revival.

According to McDonnell, the authors, Rupert Younger and Frank Partnoy, “didn't do bad at publishing quite a challenging redraft.”

This is referencing a deliberate evisceration of Marxism by avowed supporters of “free market” capitalism who seek its rehabilitation in the wake of the calamitous 2008 financial crash. According to the authors, it is no longer the “spectre of communism” that haunts the world, but the “spectre of activism” running through “the Arab Spring, Trump, Brexit and Macron,” joining “shareholder activists” with “political, social and corporate activists” among whom can be found “billionaires such as Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and Mark Zuckerberg.”

The new *Manifesto* declares that Marx and Engels, if alive today,

would see the benefits of private property because their advocacy of “the confiscation of private property” and “the abolition of inheritance” had been “proved appallingly wrong, underpinning murderous tyrannies across the world.”

This seal of approval is coupled with an endorsement of Paul Mason, whose book *Postcapitalism: A Guide to the Future* is praised for declaring that social revolution led by the working class has proved to be a utopia. Instead, the world is seeing the flowering of an epoch of “cognitive capitalism,” a “fourth industrial revolution in which shared knowledge comes to undermine the market mechanism” in a struggle between “network and hierarchy,” McDonnell summarized.

McDonnell endorsed Mason’s fantasy of young tech entrepreneurs—an array of mini-Zuckerbergs—waging an unconscious struggle for a new world in which “time after time now... network is beginning to defeat hierarchy in the development of alternative forms that pre-shadow, pre-form Postcapitalism.”

As for Marx himself, his legacy, according to McDonnell, is that there is now “much greater interest and debate in Marx’s theories of overproduction, under-consumption, declining rate of profit.”

With vague references to “the concept of who owns our economy, who controls our economy,” he added that Marx’s writings were being explored “to find any relevance to the challenges we face from the rapid expansion of new technology, automation and artificial intelligence...”

All of which led back to his and Corbyn’s advocacy of a few reforms, “a revival in the interest about co-operatives” and Labour’s last manifesto commitment to “the restoration of water, rail, Royal Mail back into public ownership.”

In his opening report to the International Committee of the Fourth International’s Marx memorial May Day Rally, WSWs Chairperson David North made the trenchant observation:

“Much of the discussion of the ‘relevance’ of Marx is dominated and distorted by this strict separation of the consideration of Marx’s economic critique of capitalism from the recognition of the enduring significance of Marxism as the historical and contemporary international political movement of the most advanced sections of the working class for the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system.”

On the same day this report was given, McDonnell offered pathetic proof of this assessment. Not even the working class, let alone the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, were features of his speech, which focused instead on covering for the labour bureaucracies. He even referenced the supposed “revival of the trade union movement” at a time when membership of the unions has reached historic lows after decades in which they have suppressed industrial action and betrayed every strike they could not prevent from taking place.

That McDonnell chose to commemorate the bicentenary of Marx’s birth at an event hosted by Lawrence and Wishart is most telling. The publishing house is historically associated with the Stalinist Communist Party of Great Britain and championing Popular Front-style collaboration with the “democratic” imperialist bourgeoisies in the 1930s.

Along with Stalinist-influenced theoreticians such as Ben Fine, on the platform was Sitaram Yechury, general secretary of the

Communist Party of India Marxist. There were workshops at which members of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, a think tank of the German Left Party, were present.

It was under such circumstances that McDonnell declared that “poor old Karl Marx” has “had some problems with branding in recent years,” given that “his name has been used to justify some of the most brutal totalitarian regimes of the last century...”

The allegation is that “because these regimes have claimed themselves to be somehow related to Marx, that his analysis of society somehow contained the roots of this oppression.” To which McDonnell replied, “Well, from what you’ve heard today in all the workshops, what you’ve read, nothing could be further from the truth.”

Framed as a defence of Marx, McDonnell in fact offers a blanket apologia for the Stalinists he was addressing, many of whose political careers were built on promulgating the lies that the Soviet Union was “actually existing socialism” and that the Maoist regime, even today, is “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

In this, too, McDonnell stays true to his political training in the Militant Tendency, whose founder, Ted Grant, combined capitulation to social democracy with proclaiming Stalinism to be a form of “proletarian Bonapartism”—an indirect representative of the proletariat that had created “workers states” in Eastern Europe, requiring only their democratisation.

McDonnell continues his long relationship with Stalinism to this day. Corbyn’s kitchen cabinet of advisers is dominated by lifelong Stalinists such as Seamus Milne and Andrew Murray, whose relations with the Labour leader go back decades. Like McDonnell, they will have stressed the need for Corbyn to discuss “what now needs to develop further” in a discussion on Marx, in order to claim that, thanks to his election as leader of the Labour Party, “another world isn’t just possible, another world is in sight.”



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