

UK: Starmer offers a Labour government to rescue big business from catastrophe

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Sir Keir Starmer’s keynote speech to Labour’s annual conference delivered a message to big business that the party can be trusted to rein in public spending while still waging war against Russia in Ukraine—and can dress this up as coming from a party that really “cares” for working people.

It was a cynical exercise of nationalist drumbeating, florid and empty phrases, evasions, and lies. That the drivel Starmer served up was greeted with the robotic standing ovations that characterise the Conservative Party was proof of how far Labour has lurched to the right, losing 200,000 members since he took leadership in 2020 with the worst elements of the grasping upper middle class firmly in control.

Beneath the conference’s Union Jack logo, Starmer began by referring once again to the queen’s death, as an example of “a nation united by a profound purpose—to pay its respects to a remarkable sovereign.”

What followed was Labour’s pitch for popular support, with one trite statement piled upon another: “a cloud of anxiety hangs over working people”; “we must provide clear leadership,” “stand with working people,” “meet their ambitions for real change,” “Walk towards a better future,” “build a new Britain, together.”

His criticism of Prime Minister Liz Truss’s Conservative government was that it had “lost control of the British economy” and “crashed the pound.” “And for what? Not for you. Not for working people. For tax cuts for the richest 1 percent in our society. Don’t forget. Don’t forgive.”

This, his only effective phrase, was followed by more nonsense—“turn our collar up and face the storm,” “the hard work, the graft and the common sense of the British people”, “We will run towards the challenges of tomorrow, “a fresh start, a new set of priorities and a

new way of governing”, “time for Britain to stand tall again. To believe in ourselves again. To chart a new course. And to get our future back.”

How was this wondrous work to be done?

Tackling the cost-of-living crisis involved putting the profits of the energy and oil companies “to work”. Fixing the National Health Service meant somehow taking on extra staff, with no serious explanation of how this would be done.

He followed this with an obscene attempt to use the cost-of-living crisis to pledge Labour’s support for war against Russia. “Now, I’m not going to stand here and pretend the awful conflict in Ukraine is not the immediate spark of the cost-of-living crisis,” he admitted, before insisting, “We will never allow Putin’s threats and imperialism to succeed. We will stand alongside Ukraine and its people fighting on the frontline of freedom. So let this entire conference say together: Slava Ukraini!”

What came next was a concerted attempt to reassure the ruling class that all that had gone before was pure rhetoric and that Labour would act in their interests alone.

Starmer spoke of how he had faced the challenge to “change our party and prepare for power all in one go... To make our Labour Party fit to serve our country.” He had forced out the hundreds of thousands who had joined Labour in the hope that his predecessor, Jeremy Corbyn, would fight for socialist policies, drive out the Blairites and take on the Tories. He had ripped “antisemitism out by its roots,” shown “our support for NATO is non-negotiable,” and that “we want business to prosper. Shed unworkable policies. Country first, party second.”

Then came the managing of workers’ expectations of what Labour could do without incurring any costs for

the major corporations and financial oligarchy:

“I would love to stand here and say Labour will fix everything. But the damage they’ve done—to our finances and our public services means this time the rescue will be harder than ever.”

“You need focus. Determination. And the courage to make very difficult choices. Particularly when managing the country’s finances...”

“We’re determined to reduce debt as a share of our economy. Every policy we announce will be fully costed. And we will set up an Office for Value for Money to make sure public spending targets the national interest.

“And we should be clear about what that means. It means not being able to do things—good Labour things—as quickly as we might like. That’s what responsible government looks like... We will only borrow to invest when it’s in the long-term national interest.”

Later, he stressed, “I’m not just pro-business, I want to partner with business... invite them to drive forward our modern industrial strategy: a true partnership between government, business and trade unions.”

These were the key passages in Starmer’s speech.

The ruling class confronts a major economic catastrophe that has seen the pound plunge in response to the Truss government’s plans to funnel £72 billion in additional public borrowing to the corporations and the super-rich. Global investors responded by making clear that the transfer of wealth to big business must proceed, but paid for through a deepened assault on the working class not additional borrowing. Wages must be slashed, and essential services bled dry.

But this redoubled offensive is being demanded under conditions where hundreds of thousands of workers are involved in strikes demanding a living wage and millions more want to do the same. Starmer’s promise is that he can impose austerity measures by working with the trade unions to control and suppress rising opposition in the working class.

The same pro-imperialist agenda is behind Labour’s foregrounding of its “Green Prosperity Plan” to “turn the UK into a green growth superpower”. This is dressed up in environmentalist language and claims that workers will benefit from cheaper energy. But the real audience for Labour’s message was the British bourgeoisie—a promise to make the UK more energy

self-reliant under conditions of a war against Russia that has sent oil and gas prices skyrocketing.

“Just look at what’s happening at the moment,” said Starmer. “The largest onshore wind farm in Wales. Who owns it? Sweden. Energy bills in Swansea are paying for schools and hospitals in Stockholm. The Chinese Communist Party has a stake in our nuclear industry. And five million people in Britain pay their bills to an energy company owned by France.”

It is to this end that Labour has promised to set up Great British Energy as a state-owned company, under the slogan “British power to the British people”, to take “advantage of the opportunities in clean British power... because it’s right for energy independence from tyrants like Putin.”

After proclaiming Labour’s commitment to “making Brexit work”, curbing immigration and ruling out working with the Scottish National Party “under any circumstances,” Starmer closed with a series of references that would have been understood by all the assembled delegates as a declaration that “The Blairites are back in charge.”

Labour, he said, was the party of “aspiration,” “economic responsibility”, “the party of the centre-ground.” After directly citing Tony Blair that Labour was “Once again, the political wing of the British people,” he boasted of how “in 1997,” the year of Blair’s first election victory, “we modernised a country held back by crumbling public services and outdated institutions.”

This is what Labour was when Corbyn led it—a right-wing party of big business, austerity and imperialist war. Today, it can openly proclaim its mission thanks to Corbyn’s refusal to either drive the right-wing cabal from the party or break to form a new party—a move that many of his remaining supporters still want him to take. Instead, he and the rump of Labour’s “left” cling desperately to the party’s rotting corpse, urging workers to back a Starmer government as supposedly the only alternative to Tory rule, when it is no alternative at all.



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