

UK: Starmer's pro-big business, pro-war Labour Party prepares for office

Thomas Scripps
3 May 2023

The Labour Party is widely expected to make significant gains over the ruling Conservatives in Thursday's local elections. Leader Sir Keir Starmer intends to use this as a platform to launch his campaign for a general election expected next year.

With polls still giving Labour a large lead and the usual collection of liberal media commentators and trade union bureaucrats bestowing their seal of approval, workers should begin asking themselves what a Labour government—the first in nearly a decade and a half—would look like.

Starmer has been doing his best to make the answer plain. Labour would rule as the unalloyed representative of big business and British imperialism, entirely in the model established by Tony Blair.

The very public removal of former leader Jeremy Corbyn, his close ally Diane Abbott, and the ultimatum issued to Labour “lefts” over support for NATO, have been the spearhead of an eviction from the party of any officeholder with the slightest left-wing leanings.

Many workers and young people who joined the party during its leadership by Corbyn, in the mistaken belief that he would lead a fight against the Blairites, have been witch-hunted or frozen out of the party. But most have left in disgust.

The other side of this process has been a determined campaign to ingratiate the Labour Party with big business and finance.

In November last year, Starmer promised the Confederation of British Industry that Labour was “Not just a pro-business party but a party that is proud of being pro-business; that respects the contribution profit makes to jobs, growth and our tax base... understands that backing private enterprise is the only way Britain pays its way in the world.”

His pitch was based on offering “a real partnership between Government, business and unions,” referring to back to his comments “at the TUC [Trades Union Congress] conference: my Labour Party is unashamedly pro-business and I say here today—that trade unions must be a crucial part of our partnership.”

The Labour leader has been making good on his pledge. According to the *Financial Times* (FT), Starmer and his Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves have met with over 1,000 “business leaders” in the last three years—roughly three every two working days.

In December last year, at a business conference in Canary Wharf in the heart of Britain's financial centre, Starmer was asked by business paper *City A.M.* “whether he could rule out any plans to ‘soak the banks’ and hike their taxes,” to which he replied, “Yes. Very, very clear fiscal rules have been in place for us now for 14, 15 months. We will ensure they are in place and adhered to the moment we get into government.”

In January this year, he and Reeves travelled to Davos to speak to the world's billionaires at the World Economic Forum, meeting with Goldman Sachs, JP Morgan Chase and Morgan Stanley.

The next month, Starmer held a business roundtable in the UK seated alongside Blair's “Prince of Darkness” spin doctor Peter Mandelson, telling those in attendance he wanted them “to see that it is possible to mould, have your fingerprints on what we're doing,” according to *Politico*.

More than words are being exchanged. In 2022, registered donations to the Labour Party exceeded £21 million, eclipsing the Tories. Starmer's points of contact with business, explains *Politico*, are “Blair's moneymen”.

These include his adviser of 10 years Waheed Alli, net worth over £100 million; Lord Levy, known during Blair's term as “Lord Cashpoint”, at the centre of the 2006 “cash for honours” scandal; and Vanessa Bowcock, Blair's manager for “high value fundraising”.

This April, the FT reports, Starmer and Reeves met with executives from private equity firms Blackstone, Advent and Brookfield. “Private equity executives said they were impressed by Starmer's willingness to engage with the industry and said Labour had been more proactive than the Conservative party,” writes the paper.

The FT notes that “Companies backed by private equity and venture capital groups now employ more than 2mn

people across the UK.” Among them, it leaves out, are Britain’s looted water companies. In return for guaranteeing this lucrative business, Reeves intends to ask for a tax change worth a pathetic £440 million a year.

Starmer has made a virtue of announcing very little concrete policy, while denouncing “magic money tree economics”—proof to big business that he will only act as instructed. But what has been announced makes the type of government “moulded” by the banks and major corporations very clear.

Previous “pledges”, made to secure the Labour leadership when many of Corbyn’s supporters were still in the party, to nationalise public utilities, increase income tax for the top 5 percent and abolish punitive Universal Credit, have all gone.

Asked on Tuesday if a Starmer government would increase taxes on the top 5 percent, he said, “We have the highest tax burden before since the second world war... what we’ve had from this government is tax rises upon tax rises upon tax rises, if they’ve proved one thing it is that their high tax low growth economy doesn’t work.” He added, “I accept that’s a different answer to what former Labour leaders would say, they’d always go straight to tax and spend.”

Scrapping tuition fees was dropped in familiar style this week with reference to “the current economic situation.”

Speaking to the *Observer* last weekend, the Labour leader explained that he would “go beyond what the Blair government did on public services... because I think there is unfinished business there... Further than Blair on public services, further than the Tories in the private sector.”

Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting has gone the furthest in spelling out what this means, attacking the National Health Service in the Tory paper the *Daily Telegraph* as a “service not a shrine” which has to “reform or die” and drop its “something-for-nothing culture,” in words later picked up by Starmer in an op-ed written for the same paper.

Workers should be warned that comparisons with Blair only tell half the story. The original “New Labour” government benefited from a period of strong economic growth, allowing it to soften the blow of privatisation and growing inequality—driven almost entirely by the gains of the top 1 percent—by also carrying out record increases in public spending (compared with governments back to 1955/56).

In the stern words of the *Economist*, “Sir Keir would not have that luxury.” In today’s conditions, the pro-business, pro-rich policies of the Blairites mean ransacking the living standards of the working class.

The dominant factor in this offensive is the NATO war with Russia—demanding hikes in military spending to be

paid for by workers—which Starmer and the Labour Party back to the hilt.

Shortly after the war began, Shadow Defence Secretary John Healey declared, “Ministers must respond to new threats to UK and European security, just as Labour in government did after the 9/11 terror attacks with the largest sustained increase in defence spending for two decades.”

The post 9/11 increase was £10 billion in real terms 2022/23 prices—a 25 percent increase in the annual defence budget.

The Labour Party is a chemically pure party of capitalism and war. It makes as much sense to quibble over the differences between a Labour and a Tory government as it does between factions in the Tory Party. Labour’s connection with the trade unions, much vaunted in pseudo-left circles, is seen by Starmer as a selling point to Britain plc, giving the party direct access to the professional policemen of the class struggle.

Placed in government, Labour would continue the savage assault on the working class. A government of national unity with the Tories is by no means excluded. The Corbynites, as many of them who have clung onto their Labour candidacy by 2024, would loyally take up their seats in any event.

Demanding a general election last year amid the crisis of the Boris Johnson and Liz Truss premierships, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) wrote, “Many class conscious and socialist-minded workers... know full well that replacing the Tories with Labour will change nothing,” but this “does not mean that the working class must abstain from intervening in the political crisis.” Rather, it requires the building of an alternative, socialist leadership for the working class.

Under conditions of escalating war and social crisis, an election in 2024 is a long way away. Social struggles of the kind now underway in France are on the agenda. The working class must be prepared for these events and the attacks of a capitalist government of any political stripe by building its own party, the SEP.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)