

John McDonnell and Labour “left” in Britain pledge loyalty to Starmer

Thomas Scripps
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The Labour Party conference was an unprecedented display of right-wing, nationalist, pro-war fervour. Leader Sir Keir Starmer declared in his keynote speech that Labour had “stood with NATO—an historic achievement of this party. Held out our hand to business. Ripped antisemitism out by the roots [in reference to the slanderous witch-hunt of allies of former leader Jeremy Corbyn]. Backed Ukraine. Country First, Party Second.”

He appealed to Conservative voters, “If you feel our country needs a party that conserves. That fights for our union. Our environment. The rule of law. Family life. The careful bond between this generation and the next. Then let me tell you: Britain already has one. And you can join it. It’s this Labour Party.”

Amid Israel’s escalating onslaught on Gaza, Starmer and his shadow cabinet members professed their unequivocal support for Benjamin Netanyahu’s murderous far-right government.

Throughout all of this, the party’s “left” represented by the Socialist Campaign Group (SCG) of Labour MPs was deathly silent. The sole show of defiance came from a member of the hitherto unknown People Demand Democracy group—a member of which threw glitter over Starmer at the start of his speech.

Multiple commentators in the media made the point that the conference had highlighted Starmer’s total control of the Labour Party, and the rout of its Corbynite rump.

The BBC reported how “In a ballot on Sunday, constituency delegates chose to prioritise motions which would not trouble the leadership.

“This in itself demonstrates a shift from the left wing of the party, and is in part due to the departure of some grassroots members who are disillusioned with the party’s direction.”

Driving home the point, a Labour HQ source told the *i* newspaper disparagingly of the party’s left flank, “We just don’t have time for them. It’s proper student politics stuff.” Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves was warmly applauded by senior Tony Blair advisor Peter Mandelson—given a front row conference seat—when she declared the “extremists” had been thrown out of the Labour Party.

But nothing could elicit a peep of protest from the SCG. Instead, its members made explicit that Starmer and the Labour leadership—many of them veterans of the years-long campaign to throw Corbyn out of office—could expect the same level of compliance as Corbyn had shown from this point forward.

Corbyn himself, expelled from the Parliamentary Labour Party and told he will never again be allowed to stand as an MP, mustered a single tweet criticising the Labour leadership for rolling out “the red carpet for climate vandals, arms firms and private healthcare”.

With Corbyn’s expulsion, de facto leadership of the SCG has fallen to his former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, the most unalloyed voice of the Labour left’s servitude to Starmer’s leadership.

For McDonnell, and much of the SCG, it involves no “compromise” to back Starmer’s commitment to NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine—they support it themselves. McDonnell has led the charge, appearing on numerous platforms advocating the shipment of weapons from Britain.

Where he has criticisms of the Labour Party, it is solely out of concern that its leadership is unnecessarily alienating workers and young people who might otherwise be lured into supporting the party. What is needed is unity in Labour’s “broad church”—the formulation used by Corbyn to oppose demands by his supporters to expel the Blairites when he was leader.

Speaking to a conference of the various membership organisations around the SCG in July, McDonnell explained, “The left has to mobilise to save the Labour government—incoming Labour government—from itself almost.”

He went on to say, reported *Labour List*, that “the left needs to ‘move past... discussing how bad things are in the party’ and begin ‘the creative gearing up and the gathering of the forces’ to create an “overall climate of opinion that actually will dominate the political agenda over the next three years and particularly when Labour goes into government’.”

Talk of dominating the political agenda is a risible fraud. The political agenda in the Labour Party is set by Starmer’s leadership and its big business backers. The SCG is marshalling what is left of its forces in a last desperate attempt to erect a vaguely “left” and purely rhetorical façade concealing the party’s right-wing programme.

McDonnell made the same argument last month in an interview with the *i* newspaper, appealing for Corbyn to be allowed to contest his Islington North parliamentary seat for the Labour Party. “McDonnell’s case,” wrote the paper, “is that Corbyn running as an independent would be a damaging media circus.” In the most striking passage McDonnell explained, “Jeremy doesn’t want to distract from the national campaign.”

McDonnell says openly what his “old friend” Corbyn says privately and what his every action demonstrates—he wants no fight with Labour.

Instead, McDonnell insisted, Corbyn could still be a political boon to Starmer, continuing the role he has played for four decades in convincing a section of the population Labour can be a vehicle for left-wing sentiment. “I think he’d be a campaigning asset, particularly in certain communities and among certain groups of people ... Why deny yourself that?”

This is of course his own offer to Starmer. In return, all the members of the SCG ask is a place as respected colleagues of the Blairites. Speaking on BBC *Newsnight* in July, McDonnell pleaded, “We’ve always been a broad church... we’re always successful when we’re a broad church. Previous leaders and prime ministers have always had in their cabinet a broad church approach—left, right and centre. They’ve tolerated different views in the party.”

He even cited Blair’s leadership as an example of “an

atmosphere of tolerance, but actually respect as well” and added that he had “written to Keir a few times saying: Look, this factionalism is causing us real problems for the future.”

Apparently this one-way correspondence is extensive. The *i* reports in its write-up of McDonnell’s interview, “he seems to write to [Starmer] quite a bit... he refers to missives on taxation, on personnel and on election strategy.”

This is the pathetic reality of the SCG. It does not offer workers and young people a strategy to fight the right-wing; it seeks to offer the right-wing means of disciplining what remains of a left-leaning membership—primarily by an appeal to “unity”, even as the party is on a war footing against them.

Large numbers have come to understand this in the eight years since Corbyn took the Labour leadership and have abandoned the party in their droves in disgust. For all McDonnell’s talk of “the gathering of forces”, his political interventions are not the voice of some influential and independent faction, they are the death rattle of Corbynism and all claims that Labour can undergo a left-wing transformation or provide the starting point for a socialist movement.

The terms “left” and “right” have no genuine significance in dealing with the Labour Party’s leading personnel. When it comes to the fight to defend jobs, wages and essential services, or Britain waging war, the “left” is a special detachment of the bureaucracy, masquerading as the “workers’ friends” while loyally opposing any political break with Labour’s rotting corpse or with the trade union bureaucracy that acts as its industrial wing in suppressing the class struggle.

The task confronting socialists is not to elect or “pressure” a Labour government to the left, but to build a genuine socialist party of the working class and young people to oppose austerity, war and dictatorship—the Socialist Equality Party.



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