

Starmer makes his pitch for a right-wing government of austerity and war: No vote for Labour!

Thomas Scripps
5 January 2024

Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer delivered a New Year speech Thursday to kick off the party's campaign for the 2024 election. It confirmed Labour's intention to run as the continuity alternative to a Conservative government that is too discredited and reviled to carry on.

Starmer announced no new policies. Besides occasional rhetoric about "working people", "fairness" and efforts being rewarded, it was an open pitch for "stability, security" and business as usual.

A series of interviews and opinion pieces by leading shadow cabinet members have made clear Labour's pro-austerity and pro-war agenda.

Starmer built on this propaganda offensive, denouncing the "big state chequebook", "grandiose utopian hope" and "populism" and calling on the population "to moderate your political wishes out of respect for the different wishes of others."

This demand for an end to social protest and fights for higher wages to offset the crushing cost-of-living crisis was packaged as the politics of "national renewal", "national unity" and "service", a word repeated thirteen times across the speech even when discounting Starmer's regular references to his time heading the Crown Prosecution Service and working with the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

These provided the sole counterpoints to the Tory Party's "politics of divide and decline" and of "cronyism". Unable to offer the working class anything, Labour is reduced to the thinnest "not the Tories" campaign imaginable—one shorn of any actual policy differences with the Tories and relying exclusively on how hated they are for Labour to be elected.

Starmer's speech was an appeal to all that is complacent in the middle class and all that is despondent in the working class. He promised "a politics that treads a little lighter on all of our lives. Because that's the thing about... any politics fuelled by division. It needs your full attention. It needs you constantly focusing on this week's common enemy. And

that's exhausting, isn't it?"

The Labour leader has consistently pitched to the ruling class that he can offer better conditions for doing business at home and a better standing for British imperialism in international politics than a crisis-ridden Tory Party that has burned through five prime ministers since it was first elected in 2010, of which four have occupied the position since September 2022.

By "service", Starmer means the service demanded of the working class by the capitalist class. By "national renewal", he means a renewal of corporate profits and of the armed forces.

Labour has made clear the "national unity" it intends to create; one based on the principles it has firmly established in the years since Starmer came to office: "no magic money tree" public spending, an "efficiency" drive in the National Health Service, no support for strikes and above all no toleration of opposition to war.

He railed again against "gesture politics" and the "party of protest" Labour had become under his predecessor Jeremy Corbyn. As he has said on previous occasions, his is instead "the party of government", "the party of fiscal responsibility", "the party of NATO" and of "strong borders".

Long prior to these interventions, Starmer put himself at the head of the "left antisemitism" witch hunt, expelling Corbyn from the parliamentary party and declaring that he would never again represent Labour, as punishment for even hinting at such accusations being politically motivated, while driving out tens of thousands of Labour Party members. The full purpose of this campaign has become clear with the Israeli genocide in Gaza, with hundreds of thousands of anti-war protestors slandered as antisemites and their democratic rights attacked.

On these and every other fundamental issue, Labour and Tory policy is indistinguishable and seen as such by large swathes of workers. Despite delivering major speeches on

migration, supporting the offshoring of asylum claims, and the military, both were excluded from Thursday's speech because Starmer knows he and his party is so thoroughly hated, especially among young people, for their xenophobia and naked defence of war crimes.

Making a supposedly popular pitch meant drawing a veil over Labour's declared agenda, knowing that this is already well understood in ruling circles.

Besides promising to run a less scandal-prone government, Starmer's sole significant difference with the Tory Party is over his willingness to work with the trade unions. Where Johnson, Truss and Sunak's governments have taken the inflammatory position that social tensions mean the union bureaucracy must be taken on and defeated, Starmer argues that the bureaucracy provides a means of suppressing the class struggle far more effective than anti-strike legislation—which only makes it more difficult for the unions to police their members.

The results of Britain's strike wave are winning many in the ruling class to the Labour leader's point of view. From a militant movement encompassing millions of workers unseen on that scale since the 1980s, the trade unions have, through a systematic campaign of demobilisation and betrayal, reduced industrial action in Britain to a strike of a few tens of thousands of junior doctors and limited action on the London Underground. Pay has fallen well behind rising prices.

At the same time, the union bureaucracy has refused to mount any action against Britain's support for NATO's de facto war against Russia in Ukraine and the Gaza genocide, even as the US and Britain threaten a regional war against Iran and its allies. The Trades Union Congress conference has instead passed resolutions pledging the union movement to support the development of the UK arms industry and NATO's war aims against Russia in Ukraine. It has issued platitudes opposing Israeli "excesses" in response to mass murder and ethnic cleansing while pathetically urging a return to negotiations on a "two-state solution".

When Starmer promises to work with the trade unions, it is to achieve these results without Tory belligerence provoking a fresh eruption of widespread industrial action. The "hope" he offers, the "frank hope, a hope that levels with you about the hard road ahead", is the hope of the ruling class for law, order and uninterrupted profit-making at home, and unrestrained imperialist violence and plunder abroad.

But it is a forlorn hope. Social and international relations have been brought to such an acute state of tension that the class struggle cannot be contained for long. When it inevitably re-erupts, a Labour government will respond just as savagely as the Conservative, deploying the state to repress strikes and protests.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) fights to lead these struggles to victories for the working class and to the establishment of a socialist society, with the trillion-pound assets of the major corporations and the super-rich placed under democratic control to meet the needs of a society in free fall.

When a general election is called, the SEP will under no circumstances call for a vote for Labour and will stand its own candidates against the twin Tory and Labour parties.

This goes for all Labour candidates, including the dwindling number of tame "lefts" who profess socialist politics and urge their warmongering party to back a ceasefire in Gaza while rejecting any struggle against its leaders.

We reject the argument put forward by Counterfire and the Stop the War Coalition that pressure can be placed on Labour by backing a supposedly left-wing faction of this utterly reactionary party of war and austerity.

We also reject the arguments of organisations like the Socialist Party, which insist that the task for workers is to convince leaders of the trade union bureaucracy, "left" Labour MPs and the exiled Jeremy Corbyn to form a new socialist party. These forces have proven time and again their hostility to the struggles of the working class and their commitment to the pro-capitalist politics of the Labour Party.

More fundamentally, Corbyn's five years as party leader proved that in a fully globalised economy—with multinationals scouring the globe for profits and countries at the mercy of the markets—the political project of national reformism is dead and cannot be revived. The trajectory of the Labour Party is not a case of bad leaders, bad though they all are. Every social democratic organisation around the world has seen the same lurch to the right.

The challenge confronting the working class, amid plummeting living standards and the eruption of war, is to build a genuinely revolutionary socialist party as the only organisation capable of fighting for its interests in the 21st century. That party is the Socialist Equality Party and its sister organisations around the world united in the International Committee of the Fourth International.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact