

Labour government is “going to be painful” for workers, says Starmer

Thomas Scripps
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“Before the election,” said British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer Tuesday, “I gave a warning.”

Ahead of the reopening of Parliament after the summer recess, he now had to be “honest with you. Things are worse than we ever imagined. In the first few weeks, we discovered a £22 billion black hole in the public finances... Even just last Wednesday, we found out that—thanks to the last government’s recklessness—we borrowed almost £5 billion more than the OBR [Office for Budget Responsibility] expected in the last three months alone.”

This was part of the “economic black hole” the Labour government had “inherited” and which would mean having to “take action and do things differently. Part of that is being honest with people—about the choices we face and how tough this will be. Frankly, things will get worse before they get better.”

Labour must “mend the public finances” and that means “difficult trade-offs” like cutting the winter fuel allowance for 10 million pensioners in the teeth of a near 10 percent average price rise in energy bills this year. “And there will be more to come. I won’t shy away from making unpopular decisions.”

The first government budget scheduled for October, Starmer went on, is “going to be painful.”

Starmer’s criticism of the previous Conservative government was that it had failed to make the necessary hard choices: “Every time they faced a difficult problem, they failed to be honest, they offered the snake oil of populism,” by which Starmer means any policy not totally dictated by international finance.

Following the “age of austerity” declared by the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010, Starmer made a word-perfect repetition of the flat-out lie told by then Chancellor George Osborne about that government’s agenda: that “those with the broadest shoulders should bear the heavier burden,” before insisting that everyone would be subjected to a “big ask” to make sacrifices.

Starmer’s repeated choice of yardstick for measuring Tory failure was extraordinary. Framing his entire speech around the recent far-right riots, he insisted that the mark of “just how far we have fallen” was that, because UK prisons are full to bursting, “literally every day” during the riots “we had to check the precise number of prison places we had and where those places were, to make sure we could arrest, charge and prosecute people quickly.”

“Not having enough prison places is about as fundamental a failure as you can get,” said the former Director of Public Prosecutions, in a line that epitomises the repression his government will mete out on the millions of workers to be further impoverished by Starmer’s “tough choices”.

Even before Starmer’s various “discoveries” about the public finances, Labour’s manifesto was described by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) as putting forward “overall spending plans that imply sharp real-terms cuts to a range of areas, without spelling out where those cuts will fall or how they are to be achieved.” IFS research economist Bee Boileau commented that Labour had promised nothing “to top up total public service spending by enough to avoid very difficult choices for many public services in the next parliament.”

Now almost every day brings a new reason for more cuts out of the mouths of Starmer and Chancellor Rachel Reeves.

What Starmer never mentioned, however, is that the main driving force for more savage austerity is Labour’s determination to step up Britain’s support for the NATO-led war against Russia in Ukraine and to take full part in the drive by Washington to seize control of the resources and markets of the entire world by also defeating China.

Labour has already pledged that the first claim to any “economic growth” the government manages to squeeze out of the exploitation of the working class will go to the armed forces, whose budget will be raised to 2.5 percent

of GDP as soon as “economic conditions” allow.

On Wednesday, immediately after delivering his message of more pain to come for workers, Starmer travels to Germany where he will discuss the next steps in the war in Ukraine with Chancellor Olaf Scholz—a war which is now playing out on Russian as well as Ukrainian soil and with NATO-trained troops and NATO-supplied weapons.

Continued escalations will mean massive new expenditures. Starmer has already signalled his eagerness to spend an estimated up to £200 billion on renewing the UK’s nuclear weapons, to be paid for through the destruction and privatisation of much of the National Health Service, education, and local services.

In the July general election, I stood as the Socialist Equality Party’s candidate for Holborn and St Pancras directly against Starmer. The SEP took this decision to warn that Starmer’s Labour would be a government of war and social reaction, taking on the role forfeited in the ruling class’s eyes by a fractious, incompetent Tory government. We explained the necessity of the workers joining the fight to build their own, socialist, party in opposition.

On Labour’s victory on the lowest election turnout in generations, we said of the “new reactionary monster” replacing Rishi Sunak in Number 10 Downing Street: “Starmer begins his premiership with blood on his hands from his endorsement of the Gaza genocide and the Ukraine war, already voicing fierce opposition to the social demands of the working class and committed to police repression of anti-genocide protesters.”

We reiterated: “Our election campaign was aimed at breaking the conspiracy of silence maintained by the capitalist media, the major parties, the trade unions and what passes for the ‘left’ over the acute dangers facing the working class, and at building a socialist alternative to Starmer’s party of genocide and war.”

Every single pseudo-left tendency in Britain lined up behind the election of a Labour government, limiting workers to supporting a couple of dozen protest candidates opposing Labour over Gaza.

The Socialist Workers Party was typical. Its articles in the election period acknowledged that “Starmer intends to govern in the same” way as the Tories, would be “an enemy of the working class” and “rule in the interests of big business and US and British imperialism.” But the call nevertheless was to vote Labour to get the Tories out.

The *Socialist Worker* urged its readers to “rejoice as Tories humiliated” and “celebrate a shattering defeat for

the open party of big business, austerity, war, NHS cuts, racism and support for Israel.” It would be “brilliant,” with the Tories’ removal, “to turn the page on 14 years of Tory brutality and class warfare.”

The political alternative to Starmer promoted by the pseudo-left was not a real opposition—the various ex-Labourites and other “independents” led by expelled former party leader Jeremy Corbyn and the dozen or so “lefts” still in Starmer’s party, and the trade union leaders.

Corbyn represents a group of five independents vainly seeking to encourage Starmer to change his stance on Israel and other issues. Starmer’s response was to withdraw the party whip from seven of Labour’s remaining “lefts” for opposing the government to back an end to the two-child benefit cap.

Starmer’s one major shift of policy from the Tories has been to bring the trade union leaders in from the cold and make them corporate partners with big business as its industrial police force.

Every tendency that backed Starmer’s election bears direct political responsibility for what it is now doing and what it will do going forward. Labour, the supposed lesser evil than the Tories, is revealing itself to be the most right-wing government in British history. It cannot be pressured to the “left”, either by embracing the leadership of the Corbynites or by appealing to the trade union bureaucracy to “fight”.

Its social attacks and waging of imperialist war must be systematically combated by class struggle means, and its political stranglehold broken through the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the new, revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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