

UK Labour government cuts fuel allowance for 10 million pensioners unopposed by the ‘left’

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Britain’s Labour government easily passed its savage Winter Fuel Payment cut Tuesday. Sir Keir Starmer’s party defeated a Conservative Party opposition motion to annul by 348 votes to 228. His working majority of 167—with the vast majority of Labour MPs openly committed to austerity—meant the outcome was never in doubt.

The fuel allowance, worth between £100 and £300, was paid to 11.4 million pensioners in 8.4 million households in England and Wales in the winter of 2022/23. Labour’s cut, to begin this winter, means that around 10 million pensioners will be deprived of the payments.

The only households now able to receive the Winter Fuel Payment are those in receipt of Pension Credit (payable only to those with an income less than £11,500 a year) or certain other means-tested benefits. The Age UK charity warns that Labour’s policy will hit 2.5 million low-income pensioners who are not on pension credit—due to not being eligible or because they have not claimed the payment.

The cut went through despite everyone knowing the terrible human cost in deaths that will result from it, as rising fuel bills—already sky high and increasing by another 10 percent from October—mean that many pensioners will be enduring months in cold homes. According to the End Fuel Poverty Coalition, an estimated almost 5,000 (4,950) excess winter deaths were caused by people having to live in cold homes during the 2022/23 winter.

Research commissioned by Labour itself, and published during the 2017 election campaign—with the party then led by Jeremy Corbyn, with Starmer in his shadow cabinet—noted, “Since the introduction of the winter fuel payment by Labour in 1997, allowing for significant variation in winter weather, deaths among the elderly have fallen from around 34,000 to 24,000.

“Half of the almost 10,000 decrease in so-called ‘excess winter deaths’—the rise in mortality that occurs each winter—between 2000 and 2012 was due to the introduction of the winter fuel allowance.”

The amount being saved as a result of the fuel payment cut is just £1.4 billion a year, a tiny fraction of the welfare budget. But for Starmer’s party, pledged to work in alliance with big business and the financial elite, the measure is just the first necessary instalment on far worse to come. Chancellor Rachel Reeves announced the Winter Fuel Payment cut in July, pledging to find £22 billion in spending cuts to be outlined in an October budget.

On the day of the vote Starmer was being welcomed by his partners-in-austerity at the Trades Union Congress (TUC) annual gathering. In a speech that won him a standing ovation he told TUC delegates, “This government will not risk its mandate for economic stability, under any circumstances.”

The vote on cutting pensioners’ income marked the second parliamentary test of the pathetic remnants of the Labour “left” since the party came to office in July.

They failed both with flying colours. In this week’s vote they managed to sink even lower than their cringing performance in July when just seven of them opposed Labour’s keeping the Tories punitive two-child cap on welfare benefits. The seven then had the whip withdrawn by Starmer and now sit as Independents, with a review on their futures to be held after six months.

Despite talk of a rebellion over the pensioners cut, this time just one Labour MP, Jon Trickett, could bring himself to vote against Starmer, and a measure that will kill elderly people in their thousands.

Instead of opposing the measure, and to ensure a continuation of their cosy parliamentary careers, 53 Labour MPs abstained. The *Guardian* described these as “rebel-lite votes—MPs refusing to back the policy, but not hating it enough to vote against, or not being brave/reckless enough to risk disciplinary action.” The actual real numbers of abstentions even worthy of the term was significantly lower, with a Labour official declaring “only a dozen of the MPs who were absent for today’s vote were not authorised”.

The level of cynicism of some of the Labour MPs, with a few shedding crocodile tears before outright backing Starmer or doing nothing to oppose him, was extraordinary.

Neil Duncan-Jordan tabled an early day motion opposing the cut. It noted the “worrying annual excess winter death figures among pensioners; recognises the impact a sharp rise in the energy price cap of 10% from 1 October will have on pensioners which will not be helped by introducing a bureaucratic and unpopular means test which undermines the benefits of universalism when older people have higher energy costs due to comorbidities and poor housing insulation; further recognises that colder homes make older people more susceptible to poor health, including hyperthermia, respiratory and circulatory disease”.

All this and Duncan-Jordan could only abstain.

Rachael Maskell, a former head of health at the Unite trade union, also abstained. Debbie Abrahams, the Labour chair of Parliament’s work and pensions committee, made a call for MPs to “protect our most vulnerable citizens” then voted to back Starmer’s cut!

But the most pathetic display was put on by the seven MPs suspended by Starmer after the July vote. Of these, just five voted with Trickett against the measure. The other two—Rebecca Long-Bailey, who stood unsuccessfully against Starmer as the left’s successor to Corbyn in the 2019 leadership election, and Imran Hussain—were scared of further jeopardizing their Labour careers and abstained.

Their voting against required the five to do nothing more. There was no protest or demonstration called by any of the independents against the austerity measures being demanded by Starmer and his Chancellor Reeves. John McDonnell, the former shadow chancellor during Corbyn’s five years as Labour leader, instead crawled on his knees as he gave his reasons for voting against.

No fight could be organised against the Labour leadership, as the vote had been “so heavily whipped, it is very difficult,” McDonnell bleated. “I have not the eloquence to persuade people to vote another way, to be honest.” This meant, “I just want to make this as a personal statement, so that my constituents know why I am voting the way that I will today.”

McDonnell was sure to include the requisite apologies for Starmer and Reeves who unfortunately had made “a decision based on, I believe, misjudgement”. He declared, “I agree with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer that we must ensure financial stability and that our income matches our expenditure.” Ahead of Reeves’s October budget in which more “pain” is already pledged, McDonnell said, “I hope that people learn the lesson as we move towards this Budget not to put us in this position again...”

Neither was any action called by Corbyn, who also sits as an Independent in, if anything, an even more supine grouping of five MPs named the Independent Alliance—having had the whip removed long ago by Starmer before being finally booted out of the party earlier this year.

Coward-in-chief Corbyn could not even bring himself to mention Starmer or the governing party—which he was a member of for 50 years—when posting on X: “I voted against cuts to winter fuel payments. Politics is about choices, and the government has chosen to push pensioners into poverty.”

In an accompanying *Tribune* magazine piece Corbyn declared, “I am proud to work alongside other MPs who were elected to speak up for a more equal world.” He pleaded with the other wretched “lefts”, “We believe austerity is the wrong choice—and our door is always open to those who want to choose differently.”

The austerity agenda being carried out by Starmer and Reeves is a ruthless exposure of the Corbynites who happily co-existed with these Thatcherites for years—as part of Corbyn’s plea for unity with the right-wing of the “Labour family”.

While in opposition, and as far back as a decade ago, Reeves was mapping out her intention, once in government, to slash the winter fuel payment as she denounced the Tories—at that point enforcing a brutal austerity programme which resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people—for being too soft on welfare cuts.

In a March 25, 2014 parliamentary debate, Reeves told MPs, “We are the party who have said that we will cut the winter fuel allowance for the richest pensioners and means-test that benefit to save money, but Government Members do not support that. The reality is that we are the party who are willing to take tough decisions to get the welfare bill down, whereas it is rising, not falling, under this Government.”

None of this prevented Corbyn from working with Reeves, et al., when coming to office as party leader a year later. Instead of carrying out the mandate hundreds of thousands of Labour members and supporters gave him to drive these Blairites out, Corbyn and McDonnell capitulated on every front before handing the party leadership back to Starmer.



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