

John McDonnell proposes to save the Labour Party from Starmer

Chris Marsden

13 June 2025

John McDonnell has issued a public call in the *Guardian* for Labour Party members to “take back control of the party.”

The angry, forceful and urgent headline of the MP, currently suspended from the Parliamentary Labour Party, reads, “Starmer and co are trashing Labour’s legacy. We must take back control of our party—before it’s too late.” But this is meant to cover for the politically rotten character of McDonnell’s declaration.

It is made by someone who, together with his longtime ally Jeremy Corbyn, played the instrumental role in handing power to Keir Starmer—the man he now portrays, years later, as “trashing” Labour to the extent that “Today’s government is unrecognisable from the party I joined as a young man. If we don’t act now, it might be lost for ever.”

McDonnell cites his 50 years as a Labour Party member, placing him joining around 1975. He was “proud that I was becoming part of a movement motivated by the highest ideals” and “joining a group of like-minded people who wanted to change the world for the better” and which was “on the right side of history.”

From that point, McDonnell “devoted my life to securing the election of Labour governments that would transform our society.” Even during “the worst of the Thatcher period and especially during the harsh years of Tory austerity, the light of hope still burned in me that eventually Labour would return to power, and we would be able to get back on the righteous path of social advance for everybody.”

Fast forward three decades and McDonnell states that when Keir Starmer was elected party leader, the “light of hope still burned” because he stood “on the policy platform that Jeremy Corbyn and I developed” but then “promptly dropped virtually every policy promise he made”.

Even so, McDonnell comforted himself that a “mealy mouthed” Starmer administration “would deliver a timid move forward” before “the desperate nature of the Tory inheritance would force him to change course” by rendering overwhelming “the argument for an alternative strategy”.

McDonnell would then come forward to save the party, as part of “the broad church of the left and progressives in the movement”.

Instead Starmer proceeded to drive “a knife into the heart of what I believed Labour stood for”, including by launching attacks on social security that led to McDonnell and six others having the party whip withdrawn for voting to abolish the Conservatives’ two-child benefit cap.

Labour’s rightward lurch—as selectively presented by McDonnell—“has opened the door to the divisive and destructive opportunism” of Nigel Farage and Reform UK. So, finally, it is time for “party members, affiliated unions and MPs” to “stand up and assert themselves” for fear that “we may not only lose a government. We could also lose a party.”

A lifetime in a Labour Party marching to the right

McDonnell tries to fool his readers with a bowdlerised account of the actual history of the Labour Party and his role in it. He joined the party in his mid-20s. Then, or shortly afterwards, he became a supporter of the pseudo-left Militant Tendency, which was to grow significantly in the 1980s by advancing itself as a socialist and even Trotskyist opposition to the party’s right-wing leadership—calling publicly for the nationalisation of the main monopolies and Labour’s transformation by militant trade union pressure and a takeover by the left, led by its “Marxist wing”.

As a young man, McDonnell witnessed how the 1974-79 Labour government prepared the way for Margaret Thatcher to come to power with its austerity attacks on the working class; how, during the 1980s, the brief ascendancy of the Labour “left” under Tony Benn ended in a political car crash as the combination of party leader Michael Foot’s support for the Falklands/Malvinas War and the split to the right by the Social Democratic Party kept Thatcher in power; how Labour under Neil Kinnock and the Trades Union Congress allowed Thatcher to smash the 1984-85 miners’ strike while Militant’s dream of transforming the Labour Party ended instead in them being witch-hunted and expelled.

McDonnell surfed this political wave as a leader of Labour’s ever-loyal “left”. After having already broken quietly with Militant, he was there as Tony Blair juked Clause IV of Labour’s constitution in 1995, formally abandoning the goal of a parliamentary road to socialism. He then became MP for Hayes and Harlington in 1997 as part of the New Labour government of first Blair then Gordon Brown, and as Blair became the most hated man in Britain as co-author, along with George W. Bush, of the illegal war against Iraq in 2003.

This is the party McDonnell describes as “a group of like-minded people who wanted to change the world for the better.”

On Labour’s backbenches, McDonnell stood for party leadership in 2007 but failed to secure enough nominations and then gave way to fellow Socialist Campaign Group MP Diane Abbott in 2010. He declined to stand in 2015—concluding that a left challenge was a lost cause—so that it was Jeremy Corbyn who became Labour leader thanks to the widespread hatred of the Blairite right after three decades of political betrayal.

“Jeremy Corbyn and I are the stabilisers of capitalism”

Corbyn, McDonnell, Abbott and company had finally won control of the party and supposedly could now transform it into an instrument to realise their socialist aspirations. This was the claim made by Britain’s pseudo-left groups, including the rival inheritors of the Militant Tendency, the Socialist Party and Socialist Appeal (now the Revolutionary Communist Party).

In contrast, the first statement by the Socialist Equality Party following Corbyn’s 2015 leadership victory took an historically rooted position,

explaining:

No one can seriously propose that this party—which, in its politics and organisation and the social composition of its apparatus, is Tory in all but name—can be transformed into an instrument of working class struggle. The British Labour Party did not begin with Blair. It is a bourgeois party of more than a century's standing and a tried and tested instrument of British imperialism and its state machine. Whether led by Clement Attlee, James Callaghan or Jeremy Corbyn, its essence remains unaltered.” [The political issues posed by Corbyn's election as UK Labour Party leader, September 14, 2015]

The SEP rejected explanations of Labour's rightward lurch that attributed this to a few bad leaders that could be rectified simply by their replacement. Rather, profound changes associated with transnational production and the global integration of finance and manufacturing had dramatically undermined the viability of the old labour organisations that were embedded in the nation-state system and advocated a programme of national reformism.

The Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR—when confronted with the failure of the autarkic economic policies pursued in opposition to socialism—had turned to capitalist restoration and the counter-revolutionary liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991, and its reintegration into the structures of world capitalism. Likewise, the leadership of social democratic parties throughout Europe had abandoned their old reformist programmes and, like Blair, openly embraced the free market.

Only the adoption of a revolutionary anti-capitalist, socialist and internationalist perspective offered a road forward for the working class.

This was confirmed by Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party. The most extraordinary but clearly politically necessary omission by McDonnell in his belated cri de coeur against Starmer is any acknowledgement that Corbyn and himself as shadow chancellor controlled the party for five years from 2015-2020. Moreover, they had the support of hundreds of thousands who flooded into the party to defeat a right-wing attempt to remove Corbyn.

Instead of taking on and expelling the right-wing, however, Corbyn pledged to keep Labour a “broad church” as he and his trade union backers reined in their supporters even as the right witch-hunted them based on the lie that opposition to Zionism and Israel's repression of the Palestinians was the new form of “left antisemitism”.

Policy after policy was abandoned, as Corbyn declared for NATO, the Trident nuclear weapons programme, and, together with McDonnell, instructed Labour-run councils to implement Tory cuts.

The self-proclaimed “Marxist chancellor” busied himself with securing the backing of the City of London and Britain's banks and boardrooms, telling a meeting of the People's Assembly in October 2017, “I've been sitting down with asset managers in the City for the last two years... They are coming to us for reassurance against a government that is falling apart. So Jeremy Corbyn and I are the stabilisers of capitalism.”

It was thanks to their own betrayals, not the entirely predictable sabotage of the right-wing or media hostility, that Corbyn lost the 2019 general election and, soon after, in April 2020, the party leadership.

Still peddling the myth of a “left transformation”

McDonnell writes that he was relatively sanguine about Starmer

replacing Corbyn because he formally supported the policies contained in the 2019 general election manifesto. But this was the blueprint to save capitalism McDonnell was touting to big business. Containing only one reference to socialism, it promised to keep corporation tax limited to 26 percent—one of the lowest rates in Europe—and a Strategic Defence and Security Review including “the renewal of the Trident nuclear deterrent.”

More fundamentally, McDonnell was fully aware that Starmer was a man carefully vetted by the state, a former Director of Public Prosecutions who, just six months after becoming leader, kicked Corbyn out of the Parliamentary Labour Party.

By the 2023 Labour Party conference, charged with preparing the party for a general election, Starmer was boasting that his leadership had “stood with NATO—an historic achievement of this party—held out our hand to business, ripped antisemitism out by the roots, backed Ukraine. Country first, party second.”

In response, McDonnell prepared to stand again to become a Labour MP even as millions were turning away in disgust from Starmer's party for its supporting genocide in Gaza. A significant element ensuring his loyalty was his enthusiastic backing of Labour's commitment to waging a proxy war against Russia in Ukraine.

Today, half a century after beginning his political career, and after he and Corbyn tested the perspective of a “left transformation” to destruction, McDonnell wheels out the same tired chimera with the sole intention of preventing the political break from Labour that is already underway.

Meanwhile Corbyn will point to this as proof that a struggle for Labour's soul is still being waged as a means of curbing, from his own position of enforced exile, demands for a new and genuinely socialist party to take on the Starmer government.

Preparing such a political break means drawing a balance sheet of the Corbyn/McDonnell experience and forming the necessary conclusion that neither can be trusted to fight for the working class.

A new party is needed that rejects the timid national reformist nostrums advanced by the Labour “left” and takes up the necessarily revolutionary socialist and internationalist perspective on which to defeat Starmer's authoritarian agenda of austerity, anti-migrant attacks and support for genocide, militarism and war.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact