

Starmer thrown a lifeline by collapse of Labour rebellion as his gutted welfare reform bill passes

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The figures of yesterday's parliamentary vote on the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payments Bill speak to two things: the weakness of Keir Starmer's Labour government and the unprincipled and spineless character of what passes for the "left" opposition within the Labour Party.

Only days ago, talk was of a 127-strong Labour rebellion that would scupper a bill targeting the sick and disabled for cuts intended to slash £5 billion from welfare spending within a decade—based on the numbers signing a previous opposition motion. But in the end, only 49 Labour MPs voted against the bill on its second reading after just 45 signed Rachael Maskell's second "reasoned amendment" designed to block the bill's passage.

Often furious media commentators have focused attention on the repeated climbdowns by Starmer and his Blairite Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Liz Kendall, made even as the bill was being debated, to explain its passing with a 75-vote majority. And the concessions were major, leaving the bill so gutted that it will make no appreciable savings, cuing speculation over what will now be cut instead and even the possibility of tax rises—and raising questions over Kendall's future, Chancellor Rachel Reeves and even Starmer himself.

However, Labour's MPs still voted by a large majority for a bill that creates a two-tier benefits system, where future claimants and those whose present health conditions worsen will be subject to harsher conditions to access PIP payments, driving them into poverty.

Moreover, speculation over the fate of various leaders notwithstanding, the decision made by 78 Labour MPs to abandon their opposition and vote for the bill, helping to secure its passage, was a declaration of loyalty. The party's dwindling "left" is as isolated today as they were when Starmer took office a year ago.

Maskell, who repeatedly declined descriptions of her leading a "rebellion", insisting that this was a vote of "conscience", is now back to business as usual for the "left"—calling forlornly for a limited tax increase for the super-rich and a Ukraine-style visa system for Palestinian refugees from Gaza.

Jeremy Corbyn, whose block of five Independent MPs voted against the amended bill, made no call for a campaign to remove Starmer and his cronies and wrote his usual entirely personal pledge on X: "Yesterday, the government removed vital support from disabled people. Today, the government will criminalise protestors who want to stop genocide. I opposed the government's attack on the disabled—and I will oppose the draconian proscription of Palestine Action."

His former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, also an Independent MP after having the party whip removed for opposing Labour's retention of the two-child Universal Credit cap, wrote an opinion piece for the *Guardian* declaring that nothing much had changed or would change in future regarding the party he is desperate to rejoin.

Headlined, "Now I truly fear for this Labour government," he paints a devastating picture of a government and party wholly unaccountable to its own members and facing "the wrath of voters at the next election".

McDonnell writes of "the immense lack of judgment" and "overweening arrogance" of Starmer's advisers, of the party's supposed "capture" by the Treasury and its austerity agenda, and its misguided belief that disabled people would be "an easy target". But Starmer's team had "totally miscalculated the deep-seated adherence of Labour members to the principle and tradition of standing up for the poorest in our society."

Of course McDonnell never explains why anyone with such deep-seated principles would remain loyal to Labour, and he is closer to the truth when he says that Labour MPs were “aware they may face a scale of opposition in their constituencies that could cost them their seats.”

He admits that Tuesday’s pathetic rebellion will change nothing fundamental regarding the trajectory of the government. Starmer may have to go, he speculates, but because of “the absolute hollowing out of democracy” throughout the party and the change of procedure for the election of the party leader, “there is a negligible chance of any future leadership candidate getting on to the ballot paper if they’re not the chosen one for the current controlling tendency.”

After all this, McDonnell’s proposal is to carry on regardless and hope for a miracle by the time of the next election in four years’ time.

The position of Britain’s pseudo-left groups is epitomised by the Socialist Workers Party. Its leading theoretician, Alex Callinicos, wrote immediately prior to the vote anticipating a much larger rebellion and boasting of “the collapse of his government’s authority over its MPs,” of Starmer “in full retreat” after apologising “for saying Britain was becoming ‘an island of strangers’ in his anti-migrant speech after the May local elections” and for making mistakes on welfare because he was “heavily focused on what was happening with Nato and the Middle East.”

All of which is true, but what follows is a complacent depiction of a “hopeless government”, of “Blairism on autopilot” and other bon mots, followed by advice to the working class to trust that Labour’s crisis and division will accelerate “the painfully slow moves to create a challenge to Starmer from the left”.

Elsewhere the *Socialist Worker* proposes a “serious fightback” by the “labour movement”. In which “The unions should be leading a fightback against the government.”

This scenario is a political dead end.

Firstly, Labour’s collapsed rebellion is made up of MPs whose “conscience” regarding benefit cuts is highly selective and is usually accompanied by affirmations that welfare reform is still necessary. And it is made up of those who have stayed true to the party despite its Thatcherite economic programme, Starmer’s support for the Gaza genocide, his warmongering over Ukraine and systematic assault on democratic rights.

The trade union bureaucracy, for its part, is not an

opponent but an ally of Starmer—policing opposition within the working class to austerity, genocide and war on behalf of big business, the banks and the super-rich.

As for the new party initiative that has centred to this point on Corbyn’s possible leadership, its progress has been glacial because Corbyn himself is desperate to avoid any action that could provide an impulse for a rebellion and a fightback by the working class against the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

He wants only an electoral alliance of various organisations who agree to uphold a few minimal reforms that would act as a safety valve for social and political discontent, while he or some younger future defector such as Zarah Sultana strikes opportunist post-election alliances with the Greens, Scottish and Welsh nationalists and even Labour itself.

The Socialist Equality Party noted that Starmer’s landslide election victory against the Tories was achieved on a historically low share of the vote and warned that Starmer’s would be a right-wing government of austerity and war. On the day Labour took office, we predicted that “social and political tensions rooted in morbid levels of inequality and hardship presage explosive confrontation with the working class.”

Starmer’s government is as right-wing, weak and unpopular as we predicted it would be. But the fight against it demands an entirely new axis of struggle for the working class.

The SEP warned against entrusting the fight against Starmer’s government to Corbyn and his pseudo-left cheerleaders, noting that Starmer only led the Labour Party because, as party leader and enjoying mass support, Corbyn had capitulated to the Blairite right on all fundamental issues, including NATO membership and nuclear weapons, and refused to oppose the “left antisemitism” witch-hunt.

We insisted that “The building of a new and genuinely socialist leadership must begin now” and that it must be based on a socialist programme to wage a fight against social devastation, in defence of democratic rights and to prevent the imperialist powers dragging the world ever deeper into war—as part of a unified offensive of the British and international working class against capitalism.



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