

Corbynite John McDonnell calls for “maximum solidarity” with Starmer government as he is readmitted to Labour’s backbench

Robert Stevens
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For the last two years the Palestine Coalition—led by Stop the War Coalition and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC)—has organised mass demonstrations in London against the genocide in Gaza. The programme advocated by this leadership, of pressuring first the Conservatives, and now the Labour government to stop backing Israel has been a political disaster.

On Saturday, Stop the War and the PSC organised a demonstration in Liverpool, held to coincide with the Labour Party annual conference beginning there the next day. Called under the slogans, “Stop Starving Gaza; Stop Arming Israel,” the organisers urged supporters to “Take the opposition to Labour’s annual conference.”

Almost two years after Israel’s genocide began and with Gaza in ruins as the fascistic Netanyahu regime finalises its ethnic cleansing operation, this latest call attracted only around 1,000 people because no one believes that Keir Starmer’s genocide-backing government will change course.

The only MP who has spoken consistently at the national rallies in London is expelled former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. During the first year of the genocide, there were occasional appearances by others in Labour’s Socialist Campaign Group of MPs, including Corbyn’s former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. However, since seven of their number had the whip withdrawn and were suspended from the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) more than a year ago—for voting against Starmer’s refusal to scrap the punitive two-child welfare benefit cap—their appearance on platforms has been sporadic. They heeded the message from the Starmer leadership that no dissent over Gaza would be tolerated.

Now, with Starmer’s own leadership being questioned, with his popularity plunging to new lows, there is a relaxing of discipline to bring the “lefts” on board and portray a

unified party that responds to working class discontent.

Just two days prior to the conference, McDonnell and Apsana Begum, the last two MPs who had still not been re-admitted into the PLP, were finally handed back the whip.

As Corbyn’s second in command while he was leader, McDonnell played a central role in demobilising the mass movement that swept them both into office in 2015 before handing the leadership over to Starmer in 2020.

During his expulsion from the PLP, McDonnell grovelled before Starmer as he begged for re-admittance to this right-wing party of big business. He authored no less than 11 op-eds in the *Guardian*, offering reams of polite advice to Starmer and Chancellor Rachel Reeves to change course.

Now back on Labour’s backbenches, McDonnell was offered a platform by Stop the War and the PSC on Saturday to burnish his tattered “left” reputation. He used the opportunity to make yet another repulsive call for “unity” with the right and a defence of the Labour government.

For his pains, both he and Labour MP Ian Byrne (representing Liverpool West Derby) were booed and heckled by audience members.

Byrne was introduced by Stop the War national officer Shabbir Lakha as one of the “few in parliament who stand with the people of Palestine.” Lakha urged the crowd to “make some noise for Ian Byrne.” Applause was sparse, failing to conceal hecklers, who called out, “It’s a genocidal Labour Party,” and “Why don’t you leave?”

McDonnell spoke around 30 minutes later and was heckled and booed as he approached the microphone.

McDonnell was forced to begin his speech by declaring, “Can I just say, there’s a guy here shouting at me. I want to say this. This is the time for maximum solidarity where we hold together on behalf, not of any individual party or any individual. It’s about the children of Gaza that are being murdered every day. We respect that and we should hold

together and use the collective strength that we have.”

The heckling continued throughout his speech as McDonnell implored listeners to pressure the Labour government to abandon its pro-genocide alliance with Israel and Washington. He declared, “In these next few days we want to maximise the pressure on every Labour delegate, whether from a trade union or from a constituency Labour Party, to stand up for the Palestinian people and ensure that the debate takes place and this genocide is condemned. So, we need you in these next few days to do all you can, talking to delegates, lobbying them, making sure your union is on side. Because if we can get that through, it will send a message to this government that we’ve had enough and we want action, not words.”

This message was reinforced by Stalinist Andrew Murray of Stop the War, who served as Corbyn’s special political adviser during his time as Labour leader. Murray hailed the meaningless decision by the Starmer government to recognise a Palestinian state, declaring, “We know that our government has been central in supporting the genocide against the Palestinian people over the last two years.

“That government has enabled, armed, diplomatically covered and justified this genocide for two years. But, but, because of our movement, because of our mass pressure, they have recognised a Palestinian state. Let’s be clear, that would never have happened if we hadn’t been mobilising and marching for the last two years in the support of the Palestinian people.”

Murray then urged, “But it is not enough. It is not even a beginning of being enough. We need to stop all the arms sales. We need full sanctions against the genocidal Israeli government. We need a ban on the RAF [Royal Air Force] base in Cyprus being used to support the Israeli forces.”

Saturday’s rally was the epitome of Stop the War’s bankrupt politics, with its representatives doing everything to prevent a break with the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Its programme, as WSWs has frequently noted, is not anti-imperialist, but is based on appeals to sections of the British ruling class which believe British imperialism is paying too high a price, for too little gain, for US-led wars.

While McDonnell was busily insisting that the only solution was more pressure on Starmer, several speakers noted that such was Labour’s desperation to keep Gaza’s destruction off the conference floor, the Labour leadership had refused to accept 38 motions over Gaza proposed for debate.

On Sunday, as the conference began, 66 anti-genocide protesters were arrested nearby—taking the total since early July to almost 1,700—for holding up signs in opposition to the Starmer government’s proscription of direct action group Palestine Action.

By Monday, the union bureaucracy, who have called no industrial action to mobilise their members and prevent the shipment of weapons and war materiel to Israel decided to finally intervene in a face-saving operation. An emergency motion—proposed by the public sector union Unison, and seconded by the train drivers’ union Aslef—politely called on the government to “employ all means reasonably available to it to prevent the commission of genocide in Gaza” and “fully suspend the arms trade with Israel and the UK-Israel trade and partnership agreement.” While the motion, which is non-binding, was passed by the conference, it commits the unions involved to nothing, with no industrial action proposed. Its sole purpose is an attempt to rehabilitate a government dripping in blood. McDonnell and company will act accordingly.

McDonnell immediately responded by reposting a PSC statement on X reading, “Huge defeat for the Government as Labour conference votes that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza. The resolution accepts the UN Commission of Inquiry report and demands sanctions and a full arms embargo. The Government must listen and act. Stop arming Israel now!”

Earlier this month, Corbyn, when asked by Channel 4 News if he had any sympathy for Starmer, replied, “Being leader of the Labour Party is very, very difficult indeed.”

Corbyn then paid tribute to his “old friends” in the party such as McDonnell who he described as “very active and very good people.”

Despite finally being forced to set up a new party to the left of Labour, Corbyn has no intention to fight against Labour as a party of austerity, war and genocide. He plans to collaborate with it, using discredited forces such as McDonnell, Diane Abbott and similar “friends” as his excuse.



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