

What UK Labour's leadership crisis means for the working class

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The UK's Andy Burnham saga has shone a light on plans in the ruling class for a more aggressive assault on social and democratic rights. It should serve as a warning to workers of the dangers they confront, and the fact that not a single politician in Parliament offers a solution.

Burnham, currently the Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester, was set to run for a seat as an MP after Andrew Gwynne resigned his Manchester constituency of Gorton and Denton, triggering a by-election.

But Labour's National Executive Committee (NEC) voted 8-1 to block what was widely understood as the first step of a party leadership challenge against Prime Minister Keir Starmer. Labour Party rules mean an elected mayor must seek NEC permission to stand down and become a parliamentary candidate.

With Burnham by some margin the least unpopular senior Labour figure, and Labour's polling figures still dire, this prompted a host of angry anonymous briefings from within the party. Even Starmer's most dedicated supporters admitted it looked desperately weak.

The tone in the bourgeois press is mournful, with the *Financial Times* best summing up the problem for the British ruling class: a prime minister failing to put through their agenda but who they are nervous about replacing.

Its editors wrote Wednesday of "Labour's destructive infighting", that "Since Starmer seems unable to hold Labour's majority together whenever he tries to drive through difficult but necessary policies, he can arguably no longer fulfil a prime minister's core function." But, they added, "Unless they are certain they have a replacement capable of rebuilding Labour's majority around a credible programme," Labour's MPs "should think hard about what is best for them and even more so for the country".

By "difficult but necessary policies", the *FT* means cuts to social spending and a huge increase in the military

budget.

On cue, this Thursday, the *Times* reported bitterly, "The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) has been told it will not be given time in parliament to introduce any new changes to the benefits system until next year at the earliest. The decision makes it less likely that any controversial reforms to the welfare system will be implemented before the next general election due in 2029."

According to the *Times*, "Government sources stressed that discussion about legislation was still continuing, and that even if welfare reform was not included in the King's Speech a bill could still be introduced at a later date in the session." But this is not enough for Britain's oligarchy, or the military, who want clear commitments to a stepped-up war on the working class immediately.

Times Chief Political Commentator Patrick Maguire complained after the Burnham saga that Starmer was depleting "the dwindling reserves of goodwill in a parliamentary party with no appetite to take political pain on behalf of its leader". *FT* columnist Stephen Bush said likewise: "The prime minister's standing is diminished, which means it is hard for him to get anything controversial through parliament".

Increasingly despairing of Starmer, the ruling class is searching for a more competent right-wing successor, installed under conditions which keep popular sentiment excluded, Britain's international investors happy and its imperialist interests secure. Alluding to the latter, an opponent of Burnham told Politics Home of his leadership challenge, "Given the international context Keir is dealing with, it's nearly criminal."

The *FT* editorial warns that "redemption is unlikely to lie in months of political infighting culminating in a rebellion that pulls the party leftward," adding, "Any successful challenge is likely to produce a more leftwing leader, and unsettle financial markets. At best that will

limit Labour's room for manoeuvre; at worst, it could lead to bond market turbulence."

This only goes to show how far to the right the agenda of the ruling class is, because not one of the candidates vying to replace Starmer represents anything like a step to the left.

Burnham spent his early years as a Labour MP as a committed Blairite, repeatedly backing the invasion of Iraq and blocking any investigation of the war crime. A health minister from 2006 and made health secretary in 2009, he helped to push through privatisation of the National Health Service.

With some sense of the way the wind was blowing, he ran as a "soft left" candidate against Jeremy Corbyn in the Labour leadership election of 2015—in which the acknowledged Blairite candidate Liz Kendall received 4.5 percent.

Burnham was still sure to let it be known that he would resign from any cabinet which questioned British membership of NATO. Around the same time, he abstained from a parliamentary vote on massive Tory welfare cuts, having told business leaders Labour needed to counter the perception that the party gave an "easy ride" to benefits recipients.

A longtime supporter of Labour Friends of Israel, Burnham has overseen multiple attacks on the right to protest in defence of the Palestinians in Manchester.

His time as mayor has otherwise been spent enriching property developers, handing them £1 billion in loans since 2015, and attacking the conditions of the city's transport workers. Thousands have carried out strike action against his Bee Network project.

Burnham's more recent criticisms of Starmer's subservience to the bond markets are an entirely cynical attempt to win support for a leadership bid, and will be dispensed with immediately afterwards. They are also aimed, under conditions in which Labour is polling at less than 20 percent, at paving the way for an alliance with the Greens or Your Party.

Green Party leader Zack Polanski told the *FT* last December, "I could see the potential to work with Andy Burnham to stop Reform and to challenge the rise of the far right. I would rule it out with Keir Starmer but I wouldn't rule it out with Burnham."

The reality is that Starmer's most likely replacement is the Blairite attack dog and favourite of the private healthcare lobby Wes Streeting, currently the health secretary. According to the *Times*, his supporters "believe he would still command the support of up to 200 Labour

MPs in a leadership contest" out of 404.

An outside shot is the home secretary, Shabana Mahmood, currently leading an extraordinary crackdown on asylum seekers and a strengthening of police powers.

Labour's nominal "left" is so prostrate that many of its members are not even particularly wedded to the facade of a "shift to the left" Burnham would offer. Writing of their preference for the Manchester Mayor, *Guardian* political editor Jessica Elgot nonetheless adds that while the "majority still will not countenance backing Streeting... others, mindful of the need to beat [Reform UK leader] Nigel Farage and hold together the party's progressive coalition, have begun to warm to the health secretary as a possibility..."

"And there are a few more—female ministers in particular—who say their preferred candidate is Shabana Mahmood, despite her hardline immigration reforms."

Whichever candidate ultimately replaces Starmer as Labour leader, their task will be to accelerate the party's right-wing programme, with Farage's Reform UK and Kemi Badenoch's Tories lined up as a replacement when necessary.

The real left-wing challenge the capitalist press fears is a movement outside Parliament in the working class.

Labour is presiding over a social catastrophe. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, "Poverty in the UK is still not just widespread, it is deeper and more damaging than at any point in the last 30 years." Workers are expected to be worse off at the end of this Parliament than they were at the start. The government is increasingly relying on draconian police powers to suppress dissent.

Under these conditions, the restraints placed on the class struggle by the trade union bureaucracy will be shattered. The decisive question for the working class is not which carbon-copy Labour leader is at the head of the country when struggles erupt, but developing its own socialist leadership in the fight against them.



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