

Starmer's "survival speech" only postpones his downfall amid Labour's collapse

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On Monday, Prime Minister Keir Starmer gave what was billed as a "survival speech" following Labour's disastrous loss in last week's local elections and elections to the devolved assemblies in Scotland and Wales.

Labour lost almost 1,500 councillors in local elections across England. The party lost power in Wales, after political dominating it for a century, and its worst-ever result at a Holyrood election returned just 17 of the 129 seats in the Scottish Parliament.

The main beneficiaries from the mass turn away from Labour by millions of workers and youth were the Greens, who presented themselves as a left alternative, and the far-right Reform UK.

Over the week, more than 30 Labour MPs called for him to go immediately, or—as did leading Socialist Campaign Group figure John McDonnell—who said Starmer should announce his departure to prepare an "orderly transition to a new leadership".

Labour backbencher Catherine West said Saturday that she was considering challenging Starmer as a stalking horse in order to prepare the ground for a real leadership bid by one of the main contenders. Eighty-one MPs are required to trigger a contest.

Starmer's former deputy Angela Rayner—a representative of the party's "soft left"—warned Sunday that "Labour exists to make working people better off. That is not happening fast enough, and it needs to change—now."

Starmer tried to don a more populist guise, stressing in his London speech his only policy choice that has had significant support: "If we'd listened to the advice of other parties [a reference to Reform and the Conservatives], right now we'd be stuck in a stand-off with Iran, having been dragged into a war that is not in our interest, and I will never do that."

Trying to channel popular discontent, he declared, "The British people are tired of a status quo that has failed them. Change cannot come quickly enough. They turn on the TV. They see bombs falling. They go to the petrol station, see prices rising. And they think, how is this happening to us again?"

The response "this time, must be different," he claimed, convincing no one after almost two years of upholding "the status quo" in office, including by handing over £13–14 billion to Ukraine in military support and loans to fight Russia, and adding around £6 billion a year to the overall UK military budget—to be taken from social spending.

Starmer then gaslit the British population, claiming he had already delivered major gains, which workers had simply failed to notice. The tin-eared prime minister said he had spent too much time "talking about what I am doing for working people, and not enough time talking about why or who I stand for"!

His reset would begin with Wednesday's King's Speech setting out the government's agenda for the coming year. But the "examples" he gave only confirmed how emphatically his government is a creature of the ruling class, and how incapable it is of making an even half-serious pitch to the working class.

The first was taking the failing privately owned British Steel plant in Scunthorpe into government ownership, subject to a "public interest test", of course. This has been coming for some time and has nothing to do with protecting jobs. It is about securing an asset vital to Britain's war machine: "Strong nations, in a world like this, need to make steel," insisted Starmer.

The second signalled to the ruling class his intent to remedy the economically disastrous break from the European Union, "putting Britain at the heart of Europe so that we are stronger on the economy, stronger on

trade, stronger on defence”.

The third was a repackaged policy to invest small sums “in apprenticeships, in technical excellence colleges, in special educational needs” and help guarantee young people the offer of a job. Everyone knows, the millions of young people deprived of a future most of all, that this means pushing them into dead-end jobs for bottom-of-the-barrel wages, on pain of cuts to welfare support.

Speaking directly to Britain’s businesses and international investors, Starmer presented himself as the only figure able to offer stability in times of global conflict and after 14 years of Tory rule ended with a catastrophic succession of short-lived prime ministers and chancellors. “I take responsibility for not walking away, not plunging our country into chaos,” he said.

For now, Starmer will remain in place. Not thanks to his speech, which confirmed him as one of the politically walking dead and was greeted by several dozen more MPs calling for him to step down, plus the resignation of four junior ministers. He staggers only thanks to the fact that the preferred replacement of his Labour opponents is not in parliament.

Most Labour MPs favour the “soft left” candidate, Andy Burnham, currently the Mayor of Greater Manchester, whose attempt to run as an MP in January was spiked by Starmer’s National Executive Committee. Rayner is expected to run on his ticket; she denounced his being blocked by the NEC as a “mistake” that should be “put right”.

A leadership election at this juncture would only serve the interests of the Blairite Wes Streeting, Starmer’s health secretary. Many Labour MPs—now terrified of losing their seats and cushy careers under Starmer—fear this outcome would not stem Labour’s crisis. Streeting’s close links to Peter Mandelson have only made this right-wing crusader against the National Health Service even more loathed among working people.

West was pressured to call off her attempt to force a leadership challenge, falling into line with those demanding Starmer set out a departure timetable. The challenge now for Starmer and Streeting’s opponents is to prepare Burnham’s path back to parliament. This is a difficult task given that Labour has very few genuinely safe seats left, after last week’s rout, in which he could run to become an MP.

Whether this run-of-the-mill, right-wing social democrat succeeds or not will make no difference to the working class or the fate of the Labour Party. His sole qualification is having the fortune to have spent the last decade in the north of England, away from the taint of too-obvious association with Starmer and his acolytes.

The same can be said of the whole rogues’ gallery presently preparing a takeover. Labour’s crisis reflects the global capitalist crisis of war and economic shocks generating massive social opposition which cannot be contained in the usual channels. The party will continue to tear itself to shreds.

These events vindicate the struggle of the Socialist Equality Party, which opposed the election of this rotten party and the pseudo-left tendencies who backed Starmer as the “lesser of two evils”.

In our first statement on his election victory, “Build the socialist opposition to Starmer’s right-wing government!” the SEP warned in the first sentence, “Sir Keir Starmer takes his place at the head of a Labour government on a collision course with the British working class.” A “new reactionary monster” had come to power, owing his “landslide” victory entirely “to the hatred with which the Conservative government of the last 14 years was viewed.”

Starmer’s time is up. But the danger is that Labour’s meltdown has been exploited, as in every other country where social democracy has played a similar role, by the far-right. Reform UK has captured the despair of impoverished, mainly ageing workers.

Other, more progressive and generally younger sections of the working and middle class have turned to the Greens as a left-wing opposition.

But neither of these capitalist parties represents a genuine political alternative, which can only be provided by a socialist internationalist programme. There is no time to lose. Workers and youth must turn to the building of their own party, the Socialist Equality Party, as the only means of fighting the ruling oligarchy, its wars and attacks on democratic rights.



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