

Who is prospective Labour Party leader and prime minister, Andy Burnham?—Part Two

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This is the second of a two-part series. Part one was published here.

A servant of big business

As Greater Manchester Mayor, Burnham sought to reinvent himself as the “everyman”, pledging to give 15 percent of his £114,000 salary to homelessness-related causes. This was part of his pledge to “end rough sleeping in Greater Manchester by 2020”.

Rough sleeping and homelessness in general remain rife in Manchester and across the wider conurbation of nearly 3 million people. The *Manchester Evening News* reported last December: “New data provided by Shelter through Freedom of Information requests has shown which areas of Greater Manchester are hardest hit by homelessness. Manchester is the highest—with 9,589 people rendered homeless, 4,678 of whom are children. This means that one in every 61 people are homeless. This is followed by Salford, with a rate of 2,327 people as of 2025.”

Such a pledge was always incompatible with the mayor’s burgeoning relationship with big business in Greater Manchester, based on central Manchester being turned into a haven for property developers—who got Peter Mandelson-style “filthy rich” from the taxpayer funding Burnham has soaked them in for a decade.

Under Burnham’s tenure, in close collaboration with a Labour-run, pro-corporate Manchester City Council—which has worked with Tory and Labour governments for almost 40 years around a “private-sector led” regeneration strategy—around 30–40 luxury skyscrapers have been completed or begun since 2017.

Dominating the skyline in central Manchester, even the *Financial Times* looks on in awe. Its chief UK business columnist, John Gapper, wrote last month in a piece titled “Inside the luxury towers behind Manchester’s revival” of the “breathtaking view across its rejuvenated city centre from a £2.5mn penthouse at the top of the 40-storey Viadux tower.”

No workers will ever step foot in these developments. Gapper writes that “much of its appeal to the residents, who mostly rent its apartments, lies at the foot of the building. The pool, yoga and fitness studios, and cinema room under the arches of the old railway viaduct on which it is built are part of the package. In return for an annual service charge for each owner of about £5,400 for a 1,000 sq ft flat, residents enjoy amenities rivalling top developments in global capitals.”

The FT notes that the developer, Salboy—owned by a gambling

industry billionaire—“sold about 70 percent of the Viadux apartments between 2020 and 2023 to Chinese and Asian buy-to-let investors. Asian enthusiasm for UK property has since diminished but about 20 percent of the W Residences have more recently gone to buyers based in the Gulf and Middle East, some as second homes.”

The main property developer profiting from Burnham’s largesse, Renaker, has built seven skyscrapers, with five more having planning permission and a further four being considered. So far Renaker, owned by billionaire Daren Whitaker, has received £615 million from the mayor’s Greater Manchester Housing Investment Loans Fund (GMHILF).

GMHILF was set up by the Tory government in 2015 to enable the Greater Manchester mayor to hand out an initial £300 million in loans to property developers. Since then, its use has exploded, with around £1 billion in loans given to Renaker and 45 to 50 other property companies across 70–75 developments.

The FT wrote of the plethora of luxury apartment blocks, “This is as much ‘Manchesterism’ as the public bus network overseen by Andy Burnham, Greater Manchester’s mayor and prime ministerial contender.” Burnham has presented the Bee Network of integrated bus and tram services brought under the control of local authority—run Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM) as his greatest victory over Thatcherism.

But as the WSWs has established, this centrepiece policy: “retains outsourcing. While fares and timetables are coordinated, the system remains a privatisation framework reliant on state subsidy and maintained on the backs of transport workers exploited to the hilt by private operators.”

The private bus companies, owned by global transnationals, continue to extract their returns from the same public subsidy stream Burnham guarantees. Franchise bidding continues to drive down wages and conditions. Bus drivers in Manchester are no strangers to the cost cutting carried out by the bus profiteers, such as those imposed at Go North West in 2021, as franchising was being finalised by Burnham, TfGM and the bus firms.

The dire implications for workers of this managed privatisation model were made clear in last year’s strike by bus drivers employed by private companies Stagecoach, Metroline and First Bus, which operate as franchises under the Bee Network.

In what can now be understood as pivotal to his bid for the Labour leadership, Burnham oversaw a sellout, in alliance with the train union bureaucracy, with the declaration that Greater Manchester and the country were “not awash with money.”

The “King of the North”

In 2020, Burnham came into conflict with Tory Prime Minister Boris Johnson over Tier 3 COVID restrictions for Greater Manchester. He presented himself as a champion of workers who “can’t choose to pay two-thirds of their rent or two-thirds of their bills.”

For his opposition, Burnham was christened in the media, the “King of the North”. But what animated “Burnham’s opposition to the government” as the WSWS noted, were “tactical differences and conflicting interests between different groups of capitalists, rather than any consideration of principle.”

The dispute was fundamentally a haggling match over business compensation—a £5 million gap between Burnham’s revised demand of £65 million and Johnson’s offer of £60 million—conducted against the backdrop of a rapidly worsening public health catastrophe. When it came to the substance of COVID policy, Burnham and his Greater Manchester Labour allies were backers of Johnson’s herd immunity strategy.

Burnham has also cultivated an image as a champion of the Hillsborough families, who fought for justice for over 30 years after 97 of their loved ones were killed—as a result of police actions—in the 1989 football stadium disaster.

The Labour Party had, as the WSWS documented from 1998, played a critical role in the cover-up: Home Secretary Jack Straw’s 1998 refusal of a new inquiry drew from Trevor Hicks, chairman of the Hillsborough Families Support Group, the verdict: “New Labour, new betrayal.”

Burnham was a senior Cabinet minister throughout the period when the Brown government was actively resisting the families’ demands.

Indeed, Burnham was heckled by tens of thousands of Liverpool supporters as he delivered a speech in April 2009 on the 20th anniversary of the disaster on behalf of Prime Minister Gordon Brown. Their message was that although no justice would be forthcoming, “we can at least pledge that 96 fellow football supporters who died will never be forgotten.”

At this the crowd chanted repeatedly, “Justice for the 96!” (a 97th fan died later from his injuries), forcing Burnham to halt his speech.

The Hillsborough Independent Panel (HIP) was established in January 2010 only under intense pressure from the families’ decades-long campaign, not from anything done by Andy Burnham. HIP concluded in 2012 that the 97 deaths were the result of police and corporate negligence. The HIP findings led to the original “accidental death” inquest verdicts being quashed and a 2016 “unlawful killings” verdict.

By 2025, after 36 years, the cover-up presided over by the Tories and Labour was complete, with no one ever held accountable. As the WSWS explained: “What has been delivered by the ruling class over Hillsborough is class justice.”

Bending the knee to the bond markets

In the few weeks since Burnham announced his intention to return to parliament—with the Makerfield by-election set for June 18—he has cast off any even vaguely reformist statements he has ever made.

Burnham has now pledged to obey the fiscal rules of Stamer’s

chancellor Rachel Reeves and confirmed he will not challenge the bond market framework he spent months criticising as Stamer’s fatal weakness. This followed criticism by big business representatives of Burnham’s statement last year that the UK economy should not be “in hock” to the bond markets.

On May 14, the *Financial Times*, amid mounting threats from big business about “bond market turbulence,” demanded that Burnham call time on any residual rhetoric opposing austerity, declaring in an editorial, “Why Labour cannot ignore the gilt market order”. The editors cautioned, “At a time when politicians are failing to cut spending and deliver credible growth strategies—while stoking instability with political infighting and a blasé attitude towards fiscal discipline—the bond market is acting as a rare adult in the room. Potential leadership challengers seeking to defy it would do so at Britain’s peril.”

Burnham folded immediately, with a spokesperson stating within days, “Andy recognises the realities of the UK’s fiscal position and that debt is high and that the government needs to show the markets it has a plan to get it down. He supports the current fiscal rules” and an economy “built on a bedrock of fiscal stability.”

The only exception Burnham is prepared to make regarding authorising spending outside the fiscal rules is to ensure the funding is available for a massive surge in military spending. Speaking of the necessity for Labour to take a “different course” and allow more borrowing to finance the rearmament demanded by NATO and the UK’s military brass, Burnham told Bloomberg in April, “There’s certainly a case, when we look at the pressure on defence spending, to consider that exceptionally outside of the rules.”

A measure of the misery Burnham would continue inflicting on the working class can be taken from the cabinet he is planning to assemble.

Former Stamer supporter Josh Simons vacated the Makerfield seat for Burnham to contest it and is expected to be rewarded with a senior government position. A New Labour veteran, Pat McFadden, the Work and Pensions Secretary and a key adviser to Stamer, is being talked up for a major Treasury position. Stamer’s former health secretary Wes Streeting—a fervent Blairite and advocate of NHS privatisation—likewise is touted for a place. In his Makerfield campaign, Burnham is calling for more “controlled immigration”, specifically endorsing the anti-immigration agenda of Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood. The *Telegraph* revealed that she “would like to stay on as Home Secretary” under Burnham.

As the WSWS has argued before: “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.” Thatcher knew what New Labour was. Workers and youth should know what Burnham is. The task is to build a party of their own—the Socialist Equality Party.

Concluded.



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