UK Labour “left” prostrate before Burnham as he assembles cabinet for austerity and war

Robert Stevens
25 June 2026

The resignation of UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer and his imminent replacement by the former Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham have confirmed that the Labour “left” will fight for nothing.

The Socialist Campaign Group (SCG) of Labour MPs and its periphery is prostrate before Burnham. This flows logically from their main political mission: saving the Labour Party at all costs.

Since Burnham’s victory in the Makerfield by-election on June 19 returned him to Westminster and cleared his path to challenge Starmer, the favoured Blairite candidate, Health Secretary Wes Streeting, has declared he would not contest a leadership contest, explaining that there is “a place” for his ideas under a Burnham premiership. Another possible contender, Chief Secretary to the Treasury Darren Jones, made clear he would not oppose Burnham taking office.

This week the *New Statesman* ran a piece headlined, “Will anyone oppose Andy Burnham?” airing the calculations of the Labour left. It revealed some “concern about a Burnham premiership within the group,” noting that “briefings that he will keep Shabana Mahmood on as Home Secretary have gone down poorly among MPs on the Labour left, who oppose her immigration reforms.” The magazine pointed to trepidation among the SCG that Josh Simons—the virulently right-wing former Makerfield MP who stood aside precisely so that Burnham could contest the seat—is expected to be handed a leading role in his government.

Posing the question whether there would be “a candidate from the left of the party”, the *New Statesman* noted that the SCG had fielded one in every leadership contest of recent decades—John McDonnell in 2007, Diane Abbott in 2010, Jeremy Corbyn in 2015, Rebecca Long-Bailey against Starmer in 2020. But this time no candidate is being put forward. With few exceptions, the rump of between 25 and 30 MPs who make up the SCG are resolutely opposed to standing anyone against Burnham.

The Stalinist *Morning Star* confirmed the surrender on Tuesday, reporting that “Many left MPs are prepared to get behind Mr Burnham at this stage.” The group was instead “working on a policy paper” spelling out the changes a Burnham government must commit to “in order to secure their support”—a meaningless caveat given that Burnham had already met “some SCG MPs, as well as other individuals on the left,” signalling “an openness to working collaboratively in stark contrast to the ultra-factional Sir Keir.”

The fact is that the Labour “left” has all but collapsed and could not field a candidate anyway. If all 30 MPs are counted, this is just 7.4 percent of Labour’s 405 MPs—far short of the 20 percent threshold (81) required to nominate a candidate.

Even prior to Burnham returning to Westminster, there was widespread speculation that the SCG might rally behind Ed Miliband—Starmer’s Energy Security Minister. A former party leader, Miliband campaigned in the 2015 general election on a pro-austerity agenda described as “Tory lite” while flaunting as a main slogan: “Controls on immigration”.

It was Miliband’s resignation—after losing to the Tories—that precipitated the leadership campaign won by Corbyn, who trounced his nearest rival with 59 percent of the vote based on massive anti-Blairite sentiment. His nearest rival, trailing on 19 percent, was none other than Andy Burnham, who Corbyn proceeded to make his shadow home secretary until he quit to run as Labour’s candidate for Mayor of Greater Manchester.

The SCG, reduced to a rump after Corbyn’s extended capitulation to the right-wing, is now de facto backing Burnham for party leader and Miliband as Burnham’s potential chancellor.

The SCG’s remaining most senior figure—following Corbyn’s expulsion from the Parliamentary Labour Party—is John McDonnell, shadow chancellor throughout Corbyn’s 2015-2020 leadership. He was first out of the blocks in endorsing Burnham.

If any single image captured the Labour “left” as the cowardly wretches they are, it was McDonnell welling up while appearing in LBC Radio’s studio in the early hours of the morning as he watched Burnham’s election victory

© World Socialist Web Site

speech like a father at his daughter's wedding.

When the LBC presenter remarked that McDonnell seemed "emotional," he replied with tears in his eyes, "I certainly am… I'm lifted by this. I think the whole Labour Party will be lifted by this, because it shows we cannot just defeat [far-right] Reform, we can trounce them."

This was, he said, because Burnham "offered hope and change." "Keir" needed "to recognise that… I think it is time to move on". He then urged "so let's plan it properly, let's not divide the party, let's try and do it with a bit of dignity and a bit of what we describe in the party as comradeship."

Other Labour "lefts" echoed McDonnell, with Richard Burgon posting that the party must now "deliver real Labour values," while Diane Abbott—Corbyn's former shadow home secretary, twice stripped of the whip by Starmer and now sitting as an Independent—likewise called for "a Labour leadership that delivers for working people."

Burnham has publicly stated, in speeches and in interviews, that he intends to do no such thing.

Under the *Times* headline "Andy Burnham: I'll cut welfare bill to fund defence" on June 12, he declared: "I am not squeamish about saying that the plan would be to reduce the welfare bill. Not at all."

He has committed to govern within the fiscal rules laid down by Starmer's chancellor Rachel Reeves, under which public spending has been throttled, and on immigration he backed Starmer's Home Secretary Mahmood's brutal anti-immigration agenda—going so far as to tell BBC Radio Manchester, "I do agree with what [Reform UK leader Nigel] Farage is saying. What we've got to do is get back to a sense of order."

Interviewed by the *Guardian* on whether he believed Israel had committed genocide in Gaza, Burnham made the ludicrous statement, "I can't judge things of that enormity from where I am as mayor of Greater Manchester." A member of Labour Friends of Israel since 2015, he said during his leadership bid that year that, if elected, his first official overseas trip would be to Israel to repair diplomatic relationships.

Knowing all this, on June 22, McDonnell responded to reports that Starmer and Burnham had met to plan a leadership handover by calling for "the restoration of the broad church approach to our party's politics," in which "left, right and centre are respected and engaged with". McDonnell had also floated that the time might be right for Burnham to readmit Corbyn back into the party.

Not for nothing did Trotsky describe the Labour "left" as the "liveried footmen of the bourgeoisie."

Last year, as the Starmer government's crisis deepened, McDonnell warned that Labour members, unions and MPs must "stand up and assert themselves," lest "we may not only lose a government. We could also lose a party." As Corbyn's shadow chancellor in 2017 he boasted that with banks and hedge funds rattled by Tory instability, "Jeremy Corbyn and I are the stabilisers of capitalism."

What McDonnell's "broad church" consists of is the forging of a new government made up of Burnham backers and cronies and the Blairite right, with the "left" acting as midwife.

Burnham's real agenda is being set by the mouthpieces of the capitalist class. This week the *Telegraph* put Burnham on notice that what matters most is correcting the main "crime" of Starmer in the eyes of the ruling class of not stumping up the vast sums required to pay for rearmament.

In separate op-eds, former British Army colonel Hamish de Bretton-Gordon warned that "Burnham will be toast if he doesn't give the Armed Forces what they need", while retired British Army officer Colonel Richard Kemp complained that Starmer will attend the NATO summit next month with a military funding commitment that prompted the resignation of Defence Secretary John Healey.

Kemp advised that instead of "deliberately sabotaging his own country's defences", it would be "much better for the credibility of this country to hold back and let the new PM [Burnham] make the call."

Burnham has got the message. The *Telegraph* reported Tuesday that he "has met Labour MPs and reassured them that he wants to give the Ministry of Defence more than the £13.5bn offered in [Starmer's] defence investment plan". Healey "is understood to believe Mr Burnham's proposed spending increase would be enough to defend Britain from Russian threats."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site