SWP Marxism Festival 2026: a demoralised gathering of political bankrupts

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"Now let's be honest, put your hand up if you are pessimistic about the prospects of the left in Britain… And you can be honest—it's a safe space."

Lewis Nielsen, national secretary of the Socialist Workers Party, Marxism Festival 2026

At the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) Marxism Festival 2026 last weekend, national secretary Lewis Nielsen invited attendees to raise their hands if they felt pessimistic about prospects for the left in Britain. Among the 150 or so session attendees, dozens raised their hands.

The photo above captures the audience response to his follow-up invitation to "Put your hand up if you veer wildly between pessimism and optimism, depending on the news". Fewer than 10 "brave souls" (as Nielsen called them) owned to being optimists.

It was a revealing incident underscoring the SWP's petty-bourgeois character. While speeches at the four-day festival (July 2-5) were peppered with references to the working class and revolutionary socialism, the event demonstrated the SWP's organic hostility to the working class. Its members, reacting impressionistically to world events, are pushed from pillar to post by social moods, including those generated by the SWP's wretched political line—such as its disastrous courting and promotion of Jeremy Corbyn.

Last year's Marxism Festival coincided with Zarah Sultana's announcement that she and Corbyn would lead a new left party to challenge Keir Starmer's Labour Party. Standing alongside Corbyn at Marxism 2025, Nielsen had told a cheering audience that Corbyn's new party was the start of a mass mobilisation to defeat war, genocide, austerity and the far-right.

This year's event took place in the slough of despond. Attendance fell by 2,000 (from last year's 5,000), and the opening rally at Hackney EartH—whose tiered seating was packed to overflow a year ago—was in the hundreds. Throughout the festival, aside from the opening rally, attendees were mainly SWP stalwarts in their 50s, 60s, and 70s.

Yet Marxism 2026 served a critical purpose for the SWP leadership. Over the four-day event, its speakers insisted on the need to soft-pedal opposition to Labour's leader-in-waiting Andy Burnham; advocated closer cooperation with Zack Polanski's Greens; and blocked any criticism of the SWP's rotten role in promoting the Corbyn project.

Despite Corbyn expelling three SWP national committee members from Your Party last November, the SWP welcomed him onto the main stage on Saturday. Nielsen (one of those expelled) sat next to Corbyn, chatting amicably, never mentioning Your Party, let alone denouncing its betrayals.

Andy Burnham—"it's complex"

In 2024, the SWP's Marxism Festival convened on the day of Britain's general election that brought Keir Starmer's Labour government to power. Then, the SWP had advocated critical support for a Labour victory, encouraging a euphoric reaction toward Labour's defeat of the Tories, while simultaneously promoting Corbyn as the hoped-for leader of a "left" regroupment.

Faced with the collapse of its claims about Labour as the "lesser evil" and of Corbyn as saviour of the "left", SWP leaders this year spoke of "a silver lining", namely Starmer's resignation.

Katie Coles, who chaired the opening rally, declared, "Nothing makes me feel more hopeful, more optimistic than seeing Starmer in a fit of tears outside Downing Street?. Good riddance!"

Nielsen declared of Burnham's rise, "British politics is different now than it was a month ago, before the Makerfield by-election". He claimed that Starmer had been forced out "because of Palestine activists up and down this country, organising and mobilising in communities. That's what made Labour toxic, and that's why Starmer had to go."

This is the worst kind of mythmaking. Millions of workers are glad to see the back of Starmer, but they have not secured a victory. Starmer was not brought down by the working class. He was forced out by Labour's Blairite majority, backed by corporate media outlets and senior military figures, who demanded a prime minister better able to implement ruling class demands for ramped-up military spending and austerity against the working class.

The truth the SWP seeks to bury is that the working class has been blocked from waging any effective fight against Starmer's right-wing government for two years. Strikes were suppressed by the trade union bureaucracy, while Corbyn sabotaged efforts to form a mass left party to challenge Labour. Despite an approval rating of -66 percent by September 2025, Starmer was given carte blanche to launch savage repression targeting pro-Palestinian activists and the left more broadly.

At the festival session, "Against pessimism: Why the left can build an alternative to Burnham", Nielsen described Burnham as "continuity Keir" while claiming the situation was more "complex" and "contradictory" than his Blairite pedigree would suggest. He cited Burnham's appeal to traditional "Labourite" policies, including his council housing pledge and inclusion of Christy Moore's song "Viva La Quinta Brigada" commemorating Irish volunteers who fought Franco in the Spanish Civil War, on his campaign playlist, as evidence of a significant shift.

He concluded: "If we just stand and say Burnham will sell out, which you know, he will, if we just stand and say that, to be honest, we are not going to pull those people [who have illusions in Burnham] around us."

Nielsen's injunction against exposing Burnham—depicted as the height of sectarianism—is a repeat of his party's role promoting Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, and Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party. In each case, the SWP justified its promotion of pro-capitalist parties and leaders with reference to "the movement from below," which would supposedly push these parties to the left. Now the SWP is using the same arguments

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to defend Blairite Andy Burnham!

"We have to be hard about the limitations and the contradictions of Burnham's project", Neilsen argued, calling for "the left to build, to get out there and try and draw into struggle as many people, as many working class people as we can in the fights against Burnham, for Palestine, for anti-racism and raising socialist politics… The fact is that Burnham is trying to strengthen the political centre to respond to that crisis, and the left needs to have a bit of audacity in terms of how we respond to it."

Nielsen's tortuous language reflects the SWP's duplicity. While he pays lip service to future "fights against Burnham", he presents a Burnham premiership as more progressive. In this way, the SWP forms the "left" flank of efforts to re-package a right-wing government.

The political content of Nielsen's call for "left-wing audacity" was clarified during the discussion. Ameen Hadi, from Salford, Greater Manchester, said the SWP's Stand Up to Racism (SUTR) had mobilised hundreds of supporters during the Makerfield by-election against far-right parties Reform UK and Rupert Lowe's Restore.

Hadi boasted that people from Burnham's election team had described SUTR's mobilisation as "the backbone" of Labour's campaign on the ground, with SUTR members on occasion outnumbering those drafted in by Labour. The SWP's work in Makerfield was part of a broader no-contest pact led by Corbyn's near-defunct Your Party, agreeing not to challenge Burnham in the name of unity against the far-right.

Another audience member spoke about the SWP's alliance with the Greens during the May council elections in Haringey. He explained that Greens councillors elected with the SWP's support were now opposing the demands of striking teachers at Highgate Wood School. But he added, "I'm not going to rush to denounce them right away—it's still early days."

Katie Coles: "I voted Green"

Katie Coles demonstrated the SWP's infinite malleability when she addressed the session, "Will the Greens stay radical?" Citing her article on the Greens from October 2025, written after 850,000 people had signed up for Corbyn's Your Party, Coles quoted, "If you're a socialist in Britain, why would you be a member of the Greens?"

She told her audience, "Now I think the question on everyone's lips is exactly the inverse. If you're a socialist in Britain today, why *wouldn't you* be a member of the Greens?" She announced: "I voted Green [in the council elections], like many other socialists in the room."

Pointing to the rise in Green Party membership over the past 12 months, she asked, "What accounts for this surge?" Her explanation was: "Labour has been catastrophically shit, and Your Party was pissed up against the wall."

No further explanation was offered, with Coles instead moving on to next business, "The Greens have consciously shifted left, and I think we should applaud them for that. Nationally, the Greens have many good policies." These she rattled off at length: Opposition to the Gaza genocide ("albeit, this was after 11 months, but it's still something to celebrate"); opposition to the smear that anti-Zionism equals antisemitism (no mention of their filibustering of a motion opposing Zionism at the Greens' spring conference, or the expulsion of anti-Zionists from membership); opposition to racism; a £15 minimum wage; repeal of anti-trade union laws etc, etc. As a recruitment pitch for the Greens, it was faultless. Coles finally offered, "I promise I will have some criticisms in here somewhere."

During the Q&A, several SWP members explained that they too had voted Green. A lone SWP member cited the Greens' support for NATO during the discussion, to no discernible effect. Coles later replied, "It does seem unfair to say that the Greens are imperialists, right? It's quite a heavy word to use. But I think what that comes out of is trying to manage a capitalist state."

There followed a 15-second potted history of the 1973 Chilean coup, warning of the dangers of parliamentarism and citing Lenin's *The State and Revolution*—"the state is made up of special bodies of armed men." She barely skipped a beat, following with, "[Green Party leader] Zack Polanski has pledged to withdraw from NATO," adding, "This is good. This is really good."

Concluding the session, she addressed Green Party members in the audience: "Really, this is a meeting about why we should be revolutionary socialists. I'll still try to sneak that in there."

Hector Sierra: "Corbyn is a principled left-wing reformist"

Taking the prize for the most cretinous report at Marxism 2026 was Héctor Sierra. His presentation, delivered at Sunday's workshop, "Your Party: a modern day tragedy?" sought to shield Corbyn (and by extension the SWP) from their central responsibility for this right-wing fiasco.

"If you've come to this meeting on the last day of Marxism looking for an inspirational story, I should tell you that you're in the wrong meeting," was Sierra's opening pitch, to general laughter. It would not be "a collective therapy session", but a "serious discussion about socialist strategy and tactics."

Your Party had been a "historic opportunity" to build "a mass socialist party to the left of the Labour Party", Sierra declared. Corbyn and Sultana "gave credibility to a call that millions of people think is necessary… for a political vehicle that could have reflected and channelled and embodied the aspirations of millions of people."

But this had been "squandered". Sierra recounted his own expulsion from Your Party on the eve of the founding conference. A wider purge of socialists had followed, and still "more horror stories", including news that three of Your Party's central executive committee members—Naomi Wimborne-Idrissi, Solma Ahmed and Mel Mullins—had been expelled for attending a conference organised by Socialist Federation (founded in response to Your Party's ban on dual membership). Other examples included "starving" local proto-branches of funds and "bureaucratic mistreatment' of the sections in Wales and Scotland, resulting in their mass resignation.

Faced with such a wretched outcome, Sierra asked, "If we are a revolutionary socialist organisation, why did we join, why did we take the decision at the SWP to join Your Party a year ago? Was it because we got carried away by the enthusiasm, and overnight we decided to sacrifice all our principles and be part of something that was fashionable, and that everybody was joining?"

Denying this essentially correct description, he replied, "We have actually at the SWP always maintained that there is a necessity to build an independent revolutionary force," but "we don't think the SWP is the finished product. We think we need to have a much bigger revolutionary party."

Therefore, "there was no incompatibility between revolutionaries like us fighting for our own ideas and for our own organisation while also building Your Party. Dual membership was a good basis for doing that."

The SWP's belief that Corbyn's faction would accept dual membership was not simply naivety; it was in line with efforts to conceal the right-wing agenda of Corbyn's team and provide Your Party with socialist bona fides.

Nielsen continued, "Our expectation, by the way, was not that revolutionaries like us were going to take over Your Party. We, unlike

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other people, had no illusions that if you fight for the perfect programme for Your Party, [it] is going to magically become a mass revolutionary party. Our expectation was that the dominant politics of the leadership of Your Party and of most of their members, were going to be what the SWP would describe as left reformists."

Despite all their proclamations that Your Party was the "starting gun" of a mass socialist challenge to Labour, Sierra now admits the truth: the SWP never had any intention of challenging the "dominant politics of the leadership."

Downplaying the scale of Your Party's betrayal, he argued that unlike Syriza or Podemos, Corbyn's party was "never tested" because it had not come to power and faced the dictates of the state. In fact, by the time of its founding conference, Your Party had also been tested to destruction. Corbyn's witch-hunting, expulsions and purges had one central aim: the creation of a bureaucratic vehicle to sabotage and suppress left-wing sentiment in the working class.

Concluding his report, Sierra declared, "Despite the title of this meeting… 'a modern day tragedy?', I want to say that Corbynism was a tragedy, and Your Party was a farce." Poor Jeremy!

Identifying the "main agents in this disaster," he said only that "I will describe the politics of those agents as left-wing reformism". Diplomatically, these "agents" were not named, because—as far as the SWP is concerned—Corbyn, Sultana and their respective backers in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy are not the source of the problem.

"The reason that reformist parties dominate," Sierra explained, "is because they articulate the dominant form of consciousness in society, reformist consciousness". Adding for good measure, "nowhere in the world has the collapse or demise of… social democratic parties led automatically to a surge of support for revolutionary parties. And that tells us something about how deep reformist consciousness has still run in the working class."

Here we have it: the cause of the defeats is not the politics of the pro-capitalist parties and leaderships; rather, these simply reflect the backward consciousness of the working class, forcing the otherwise well-meaning leaders, "trapped in their reformist logic," to betray the workers in struggle. Corbyn, Sierra insisted, was "a principled left-wing reformist"!!!

Sierra's outrageous presentation, concealing everything which has happened over the past 12 months, was not questioned by a single SWP member. They all clapped enthusiastically.

When this reporter raised her hand to question Sierra, a long line of SWP speakers was selected out of turn before the discussion was declared "out of time". Calling on Sierra nonetheless to explain how Corbyn's expulsion of socialists made him a "principled left-wing reformist," Sierra was unable to answer.

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