

Durham Miners' Gala used by labour and union bureaucracy to back Andy Burnham as new prime minister

Our reporters
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This year's Durham Miners' Gala was the occasion for the Labour and trade union bureaucracy to declare its backing for Andy Burnham, who is about to replace Keir Starmer as Labour Party leader and prime minister.

The gala, held annually in the former mining stronghold, was the main traditional gathering of the trade union movement with attendances that spanned upwards of 200-300,000 people. With the decline and collapse of the mining industry following the defeat of the 1984-85 national strike, the gala has been reduced in size and diluted politically. There was a certain boost in its political character when there were swelling attendances during Jeremy Corbyn's tenure as Labour leader on a nominally left platform from 2015-20. But Corbyn's political cowardice ensured that this bubble burst.

This year, speaking on behalf of the union bureaucracy were Andrea Egan, general secretary of the largest trade union, Unison, and Joanne Thomas of the shop and retail workers union USDAW, alongside gala president, former mineworker Alan Mardghum.

Speaking as the sole representative of the Labour Party was Andy McDonald, MP for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East constituency in the northeast.

The platform tried to convince everyone that Keir Starmer's right-wing leadership of the Labour Party could possibly be only an unfortunate and thankfully brief interruption to now be remedied by Burnham.

Mardghum said that because of Labour's deepening of austerity and backing of genocide in Gaza, the far-right Reform UK had made gains including taking councils in the northeast. "If we don't change course and whoever the new leader is and it looks like Andy Burnham, and I wish him well in his new job, but Andy, for Christ's sake, change course. Work in the interests of working people, not the capitalist class of criminals."

Egan said of Starmer, "Politicians are still more interested in spending money on weapons and foreign wars rather than

investing in our people." The government were "meeting the demands of the generals, of Donald Trump, and leaving workers by the wayside." Instead, based on the fight of workers who first set up unions in the 19th century, "We should be picking up their spirit, carrying the flag of socialism. Organising hard, getting ready to fight and preparing to strike."

However, all this could be avoided because "in Unison, we are clear about what that means politically." The Labour government's job was "Repairing our public services, bringing jobs back in house. Real, real public ownership. Taxing the rich with the biggest pockets instead of pickpocketing ours, standing up for the majority, standing up for the working class values, and not throwing migrant health and care workers under the bus."

Egan, who won Unison's leadership as a "left" candidate in January, was speaking as a representative of a union that was critical in shutting down strikes in the National Health Service and bringing Starmer to power.

Burnham has already made clear he will do none of these things, and is committed to spending tens of billions more on the military budget, slashing the welfare budget to pay for it and on immigration has backed Starmer's Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood's brutal anti-immigration agenda.

Thomas also warned of the rise of Reform, stating, "Before 2021, Labour had held power [in Durham] for over a century. Last May, Reform swept to power. Labour now has just four councillors; in Sunderland there are five and Gateshead 12 and in Newcastle just two." This was a "message the Labour Party needs to hear."

But a saviour had arrived! Because he was "based on the spirit of the Durham miners" [!], "Andy Burnham has won in Makerfield [by-election against Reform UK]"

Now "Andy has a lot to live up to. Andy has a lot to deliver. Andy has a lot to change" and he "should deliver a new deal for working people in full and without delay". Therefore, "next year the Durham miners should invite

Andy to this big meeting so he can tell our communities face to face how he is delivering for them.”

McDonald enthused, “We’ve got a Labour government, but within the next week we’re going to get a new Labour prime minister... And he comes from the north. Andy Burnham is absolutely right. We have to deliver for working people in our communities, because if we don’t, we won’t get another chance for a very, very long time. We have to seize this last chance for a total reset, to stop with the mistakes and the terrible judgments.”

McDonald denounced Starmer for saying that “he took over a morally bankrupt Labour Party. Absolute rubbish.” This was the same Starmer who was “an apologist for a sex trafficker and a paedophile as ambassador to America.” Moral bankruptcy was “saying Israel has the right to cut off water, food and medical lives of Palestinians, when that amounts to genocide.” And to vilify “a good and decent man, Jeremy Corbyn”. This was the cue for Corbyn to stand up from his seat at the back of the stage and take a round of applause and cheers.

Among workers and youth visiting the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Supporters Campaign stall, there was widespread distrust of Burnham and disillusionment with Corbyn’s Your Party for failing to provide a socialist alternative.

Campaigners distributed hundreds of copies of the *World Socialist Web Site* article, “Burnham’s ‘Manchesterism’ and ‘Productive State’ agenda: austerity, privatisation and war by another name.”

James, a young local government worker from London, said, “Burnham is just Starmer in a t-shirt. Thanks for this. The hype around Burnham is unbearable. He’s a pillar of the Blairite establishment. He’s pro-business and is already talking about more cuts to pay for war.”

The response at the SEP stall demonstrated the desire to draw the historical lessons of the betrayals carried out by the trade union and Labour bureaucracy, and an interest in a genuine socialist and internationalist programme. Among the titles sold were copies of *Trotsky, Stalin and the 1926 British General Strike: Lessons for Today*; of *The Lessons of the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike (40th anniversary edition)*; of *Corbyn’s New Left Party: What It Is and What It Isn’t*; and the Socialist Equality Party’s Seventh Congress Resolution.

Mark, an events technician from West Yorkshire who bought the SEP pamphlet on Your Party, said, “I had hopes for Your Party, but Corbyn has been a let-down. The term socialism has been corrupted to mean anything other than real opposition to capitalism. You cannot work within the system. It does need to be international. Workers globally have real power. Political education is needed on the true meaning of socialism.”

Steve, a teacher in Durham, said, “We are massively overworked and massively underpaid. We’ve just had a pay rise where I work. It’s still not enough to really meet what we should be getting paid to even survive. I think they are putting money into the wrong places.”

His friend, who works in the energy industry, added, “They are stopping immigration and putting money into defence, war. They are putting up new buildings which don’t need to be built. In Durham, they had all the new council offices built a couple of years ago. It has just gone to waste and was not even used as council buildings in the end. There’s still buildings standing empty on the Riverwalk.”

On Burnham he said, “He pretends that he’s a person of the people, he’s northern, he’s going to bring the country together. But they’re all in it for themselves. They’re in it for the backhanded deals, the bonuses, the extra pay they get from other companies and stuff like that. I don’t trust anybody who trusts the Labour Party. I fully support immigration. Anybody who wants to come to this country and work and provide to society is welcome. The people who are doing the work should be deciding where the money goes, not people who are at the top taking the profits and then keeping it for themselves.”

Fiona, a retired social worker who lives in Durham, said Burnham was a Blairite and “more of the same”. She condemned his “welfare to warfare” agenda as outrageous, as she helps at food banks. She left the Labour Party over the 2003 Iraq War, later rejoined, then left again and has since felt politically “homeless”. She said the Greens were no alternative and agreed that a new party had to be directed to the working class: “We have to start again with people who are in dire need and educate them.”

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