

New UK prime minister Andy Burnham will step up Labour's agenda of austerity and war

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Andy Burnham became Britain's seventh prime minister in just 10 years as his predecessor Keir Starmer scuttled off stage after his final meeting with King Charles. Starmer was followed later that day by his two closest allies, former chancellor Rachel Reeves and deputy prime minister David Lammy, along with numerous other loyalists who will be missed by no one.

Burnham did make sure to retain arch-Blairite Jonathan Powell as national security adviser to underscore the continuity of British imperialism's foreign policy. But this was dwarfed in significance by Burnham's most important appointment to his new cabinet, John Healey as chancellor.

Healey's resignation as defence secretary precipitated Starmer's downfall and paved the way for Burnham's rise. He denounced Starmer and Reeves for being "unable and unwilling" to commit the resources required to wage war effectively, identifying a £28 billion "black hole" in existing defence spending and insisting that the real shortfall was closer to £78 billion.

Healey is an advocate of military aggression against Russia and China, up to and including nuclear weapons. He has now been placed in a position to determine the savage cuts required to bring about his dream of "full spectrum society resilience"—a blueprint for the militarisation of all aspects of social life.

The scale of the crisis represented by the rapid turnover of prime ministers—Starmer lasted just two years—was noted by a *Times* editorial: "The former mayor of Greater Manchester will be the fourth prime minister the King has received during a reign that is not yet four years long. There is no more morbid, more depressing, symptom of Britain's broken politics than the churn rate in No 10."

In a brief speech outside Downing Street, Burnham promised an end to political turmoil. Announcing no new policies whatsoever, he said the rapid churn of prime ministers demonstrated that "Britain needs to show the world that we can regain our stability once again, and that is our challenge—to make politics work, to make it work better."

A "new political model and a new economic model" would supposedly provide a "circuit breaker" for 40 years of damaging policies, of centralisation and deindustrialisation, and make politics "more collaborative".

This is to be fleshed out later this year in a "new plan for Britain, a 10-year plan, laying out a path from where we are now to where I believe we all want Britain to be, wherever we're coming from, whatever party we support." This miraculous "plan" to unify everyone included working with Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch and far-right Reform UK's Nigel Farage, Burnham stressed later.

This decade-long mission would be coupled with immediate measures "to give people some breathing space now, some help with the cost of living..." The most important indication of what this means in practice was a pledge to "help more young people into work" as "the fair and sustainable way to bring the welfare bill down, to meet our fiscal rules, and to honour our commitments on defence to our international partners." In short, to make cuts to social spending to fund military spending, behind a mask of concern at joblessness.

In several interviews Burnham stressed that "taking back control" meant taking back control of public spending, i.e., cutting it in line with his commitment to uphold the fiscal discipline of the Starmer government.

This all barely covers how deeply reactionary a Burnham government will be. Last week he told the *Times* that "my priority will be protecting the UK by boosting defence spending... Our commitment to NATO and the UK's nuclear deterrent will remain absolute. Our relationship with the US will remain critical... And Britain's support for Ukraine will not waver."

This was reinforced Monday by Healey's appointment and when Burnham said he would tell Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky that "I will be with him 100% as Keir Starmer has been," with the UK's support remaining "resolute". Zelensky will be one of the first foreign leaders Burnham speaks to, after a priority call with US President Donald Trump.

Ludicrous rhetoric regarding a 10-year plan to renew Britain notwithstanding, Burnham must and will deepen the offensive against the working class. This is what is signalled by his pledge to speak to Trump amid a de facto renewal of the war with Iran and discussions of invasion, and with Zelensky as the European powers systematically escalate the war in Ukraine.

The world situation is characterised by an escalating global conflict to carve up essential territories, resources and markets between the imperialist powers. This eruption of militarism and its devastating impact demand ever deeper austerity, not a reversal.

Social spending must be slashed to free up resources for war and push more young people into the armed forces. Aggression against Russia and China, two of the world's largest military powers, will drive the greatest offensive on the working class, its social and democratic rights, since the 1930s.

The claim that Burnham can change the course of the government is a pale imitation of the claims made earlier about Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party.

Corbyn entered the 2015 leadership contest with an explicit, stated objective: to prevent the type of implosion that had almost destroyed other social-democratic parties across Europe. His aim was to channel anti-austerity, anti-war sentiment that had welled up after the 2008 financial crash back into the Labour Party, where it could be managed, contained and defused.

The widespread illusions that Corbyn would lead a left renaissance were dashed as he worked to betray opposition to the Blairite right and preserve the grip over the working class of the bureaucracy—of which he is a loyal representative.

The pseudo-left groups—such as the Socialist Workers Party—who gave their fulsome backing to Corbyn at that time now claim that pressure exerted “from below” on Burnham will force an albeit more limited shift to the left. In this way they continue to oppose the necessary political break with the Labour Party, and with the trade union bureaucracy on which it depends to police and suppress the class struggle.

It must be recalled that Starmer replaced Corbyn while promising to implement a 10-point plan more left-sounding than Burnham's miserable offering. It included higher taxes on the top earners; additional welfare measures; the scraping of university fees; a Prevention of Military Intervention Act to stop illegal wars; ending outsourcing in the National Health Service and local government; defending migrant rights and freedom of movement; strengthening workers' rights; and bringing rail, mail, energy and water into public ownership.

They all evaporated like mist.

Whatever temporary and tactical shifts workers' social and political opposition may produce, the fundamental direction of capitalist politics today is shaped by pressure “from above”, exerted by the oligarchy. This financial and corporate elite is set on a common global agenda, destroying democratic rights and eliminating social gains to prepare for trade war and military violence.

America is the prime example, where Donald Trump's presidency is the direct instrument of multi-billionaires. But the Elon Musks and Jeff Bezoses of this world exert the same influence everywhere. The financial oligarchy buys control of political parties by pushing millions into their coffers, and not just the far-right. Moreover, the demands of the oligarchy are passed on through the bond and stock markets that can threaten national economies with collapse, and by the media and business groups—none of which Burnham has either the ability or the desire to oppose.

All talk of alleviating the social distress faced by millions of workers without challenging the power of the oligarchy, without mobilising the working class on an anti-capitalist and anti-war programme, is a dangerous political fraud.

Burnham has been installed to do what Starmer failed to do. He will continue and intensify Britain's participation in the US-led NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, as well as the broader global preparations for direct military conflict with Russia and China, at whatever cost to the working class.

It is time to break with the illusion that Labour can be reformed or “saved”. The bitter price the working class paid for this lie began with the Starmer government and its agenda of austerity and war. It must not be allowed to continue under Burnham, to more devastating impact.



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