Burnham pledges to be “relentless” in blocking migrants crossing the Channel

Robert Stevens
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At least 99 people died Thursday-Friday during desperate attempts to swim from Morocco to the Spanish exclave of Ceuta in North Africa, drowned or crushed against the breakwater.

The aftermath has seen a filthy right-wing backlash across Europe’s capitalist parties. As Spain, Italy and France all tightened borders, 22 European Union (EU) leaders demanded an emergency summit, with interior ministers convening this week.

UK Labour Prime Minister Andy Burnham travelled to Dover on Sunday to take his place in this xenophobic campaign. Burnham declared that his government would be “relentless” in stopping refugees reaching Britain from France in small boats.

Speaking with the White Cliffs of Dover as his backdrop, he declared, in a dog-whistle to a far-right constituency, “We’re just going to be relentless”. He added that the public “don’t like the idea that the border looks like it’s not controlled. We need to bring back that control. While in Dover, he visited a command room where officers of the National Crime Agency (NCA), the Coastguard and Border Security Command use drones to track crossings,

The visit was choreographed alongside an appearance by Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood at NCA headquarters in Stratford, east London. The Home Office announced that NCA officers assigned to “organised immigration crime” have more than doubled since the start of 2025, from 376 to almost 800—funded from over £280 million given by Burnham’s predecessor Keir Starmer to Border Security Command.

Mahmood declared, “There is more to be done, but this Government is restoring control at our border.” More than 1,100 boats and engines have been seized since Labour took office in 2024, and almost 70,000 people removed or deported—a 41 percent increase, the Home Office boasted in a June 30 statement.

Burnham’s reference to building “a system that offers safe routes for people as well” is a fig leaf. The overwhelming focus of his strategy is, “crucially, increasing the enforcement activity.”

The human cost of enforcement activity shows the brutality of anti-immigration policies. On July 29, the busiest day of the year so far for small boat crossings, 752 people reached Britain. This generated a mass of right-wing commentary, but hardly anything was said about the four migrants who died overnight in the Channel.

One man perished when a boat capsized off Hardelot, and three were found aboard a boat launched from Dunkirk. According to the University of Oxford’s Migration Observatory, 162 people died in the Channel between 2018 and 2025.

Asked about the situation in Morrocco/Spain, Burnham replied that Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez—also a social democrat—had assured him some 98 percent had been returned. Burnham said this dealt “substantially” with the immediate issue, but added, “of course there’s a broader issue about the Schengen area and our relationship with it”. He added, “I would want to be in regular dialogue with the EU on those issues.”

Burnham’s finger-wagging over Schengen—which the UK has never been a part of—is a hand extended to its far-right critics, led by Italy’s Giorgia Meloni. Painting the agreement as some sort of wildly liberal border regime underscores how reactionary Labour’s own policy is.

The external frontier of “Fortress Europe” is sealed with barbed wire, fences, armed guards and violent pushbacks that have turned the Mediterranean and North Africa into a mass grave. Ceuta itself saw 37 deaths on one day in 2022 and at least 14 on another in 2014. In recent years, even the supposedly frictionless border travel within Schengen has begun to be carved up by the same repressive architecture.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned before Burnham

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entered office that an anti-immigration agenda was central to his right-wing programme.

On June 25, he committed to anti-migrant policies, telling BBC Radio Manchester during the Makerfield by-election campaign (which saw him returned as an MP to Parliament), “I do agree with what [far-right Reform UK leader Nigel] Farage is saying. What we’ve got to do is get back to a sense of order.”

He subsequently called for “greater use of detention so that people who have got no basis for a claim are not actually admitted into the country,” while dropping his earlier opposition to the “no recourse to public funds” rule that drives asylum seekers into permanent homelessness.

On July 13, the day he secured the nominations from hundreds of Labour MPs, making him the unopposed party leader, Burnham voted for Mahmood’s Immigration and Asylum Bill.

The Bill tightens Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, replaces immigration judges with “independent adjudicators” tasked with fast-tracking deportations, makes refugee status temporary and reviewable every 30 months, imposes a financial “contribution” of around £10,000 on asylum seekers, and raises the qualifying period for indefinite leave to remain from five years to between 10 and 20—up to 30 years for those deemed to have entered “illegally”.

Burnham’s embrace of the Starmer government’s anti-immigration programme is one of a suite of reactionary positions, all centred-on plans to slash welfare costs to fund a surge in military spending. The Labour leader told the *Times* on June 12, during his election campaign, under the headline “Andy Burnham: I’ll cut welfare bill to fund defence”: “I am not squeamish about saying that the plan would be to reduce the welfare bill. Not at all.”

He has been true to his word, travelling last week to BAE Systems’ Barrow-in-Furness shipyard on July 30 to announce the corporate beneficiaries of the Starmer government’s £8.4 billion for the latest delivery phase of the Dreadnought-class ballistic missile submarine programme. The bulk of this, £5.9 billion, is going to the already drowning in profits BAE, and £2.5 billion to supply chain firms.

Asked whether he would meet NATO’s target of 5 percent of GDP on defence and security by 2035, of which 3.5 percent is core military spending, Burnham replied, “In terms of our NATO commitments, I have been very clear that we will honour those commitments.”

Just prior to this, Burnham hosted Ukrainian President Zelensky, promising deeper UK involvement in war with Russia.

Having endorsed Mahmood’s anti-migrant crackdown on his way into Parliament, Burnham has retained her at the Home Office to continue the job, pledging his own “relentless” support within two weeks of coming to power. Millions are being buried under a cost-of-living crisis and Labour is keeping the anti-migrant scapegoating machine at the ready. His “cost of living government” pretence is a cover for reactionary policies which will encourage further shifts to the right.

On Monday, Farage unveiled Reform UK’s “Operation Fortress”, promising the “largest military operation since World War Two” to end small boat crossings if the party wins the next general election. This would see a joint command of the Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Royal Air Force and Army units intercepting every boat and returning its occupants to France or Belgium, backed by emergency legislation.

“Under a Reform government, within a fortnight, there would be no more boats,” Farage told reporters at a press conference. The party’s home affairs spokesperson Zia Yusuf declared that Britain is “being invaded” while Conservative and Labour governments had “responded with a free ferry service and free hotels [for asylum seekers]”.

Conservative Shadow Home Secretary Chris Philp responded by demanding withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights to allow deportation “within a week of arrival” and the revival of their deportation to Rwanda scheme. In two editorials, *The Sun* dismissed Burnham’s plan as being identical to Starmer’s and failing to go far enough.

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