Burnham unveils Sainsbury's "work experience" scheme: unpaid labour for UK employers

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Prime Minister Andy Burnham has unveiled plans for Sainsbury's, the UK's second-largest supermarket chain, to use 10,000 young people as unpaid labour under the guise of "work experience". The "Modern Work Experience Programme" will be launched in October, with Burnham calling on other companies to follow suit.

In a government press release announcing the programme, Burnham declared, "The youth unemployment crisis has been ignored for too long. This government is making it a top priority and bringing back hope."

A cringeworthy PR stunt featured Burnham visiting a local Sainsbury's store in Nine Elms, south London, touting the scheme over the store's PA system. Flanked by Labour's London Mayor Sadiq Khan—both decked in Sainsbury's uniforms and name badges—Burnham joined the local store manager for a guided tour and posed for the cameras beside shopfloor workers.

Heaping praise on Sainsbury's for "stepping up", Burnham claimed the scheme will open 10,000 opportunities each year to help young people "gain experience and get a foot in the door". But the scheme offers no guarantee of a job on completion and no recognised qualification. The company states vaguely that it will provide "a series of real, hands-on experiences with employers over time."

Sainsbury's own contribution to the jobs crisis has been to make 3,000 redundancies in 2025 as part of its cost-cutting programme, while reporting an underlying operating profit of £1 billion.

Burnham's choice of Sainsbury's to promote his "Modern Work Experience Program" underscores the incestuous relationship between the Labour Party he leads and major corporate and financial interests.

Lord Sainsbury of Turville was made a Life Peer by Blair's New Labour government in 1997, and is among the party's largest business donors, contributing £550,000 in March 2026 alone. He helped install Burnham as Starmer's replacement, providing £66,622 for contractors working on Burnham's team during the leadership contest, with overall financial support reaching £164,000.

This backing explodes the myth peddled by the trade union bureaucracy that Burnham will lead a more "worker-friendly" government than that headed by Keir Starmer, including his threadbare rhetoric about "ending 40 years of neo-liberalism".

The government states its work experience program will "target schools with the higher levels of free school meal uptake where young people face some of the biggest barriers to work." This is a blueprint for employers beyond Sainsbury's to exploit young people in the poorest deindustrialised parts of the country where secure and decent jobs have become a thing of the past.

It comes virtually cost-free to employers, harnessing young people to a business model of relentless cuts to permanent jobs and increased productivity. It is geared toward Burnham's wider restructuring of education, tailored to big business. His stated aim of "closing the gap between the classroom and workplace" means linking technical education from the age of 14 to the needs of local employers, based on market competition and exploitation.

Burnham, barely six weeks in office, has managed to exceed Margaret Thatcher's Youth Training Schemes and Tony Blair's "welfare to work" program, which workers broadly detested as government-run cheap labour for employers.

Welfare sanctions and war

Labour's scheme, normalising unpaid labour, is part of a frontal assault on the welfare benefits of approximately one million 16-24-year-olds not in employment, education or training, designated "NEETS" by the media and political

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establishment.

Labour's "Jobs Guarantee" programme for unemployed youth began its rollout in spring. The scheme applies to "all 18–24-year-olds who have been claiming Universal Credit and looking for work for 18 months", with 90,000 places forecast by 2029. The government will pay up to 25 hours' work per week at minimum wage rates, with employers benefiting from subsidised cheap labour. The scheme's first placements have started at major companies including Boots' retail, office and warehouse roles, and OCS, a facilities management firm, in cleaning, security and catering at client sites. Exact numbers are unknown.

Labour has already confirmed a compulsory element to their "Jobs Guarantee" with a clear threat that those who don't enrol will have their benefits cut. Pat McFadden, Work and Pensions Secretary under Starmer, who Burnham has retained, told the BBC in December, "Yes, sanction is part of the system."

Burnham has said he is not "squeamish" about welfare cuts to fund increased military spending, having confirmed a £15 billion increase for the armed forces over the next four years — taking planned military spending to £298 billion by 2029/30.

As part of £8.4 billion for the latest phase of the Dreadnought programme to build Britain's next generation of nuclear-armed submarines, Burnham is touting a wider Defence Nuclear Enterprise scheme with 22,000 apprenticeships by 2035. The training of young people in skilled occupations is being subordinated to a massive military-industrial programme centred on the preparations for World War III.

The trade union bureaucracy is fully on board with these plans. In March, the Unite union welcomed the next phase of Britain's nuclear submarine program with Rolls-Royce and BAE Systems, part of the AUKUS military alliance with Australia and the United States against China. Unite national officer Rhys McCarthy described it as a "golden opportunity" to promote UK skills and apprenticeships, citing the "good relationships" Unite has built "with our sister unions in Australia and the US".

The unions have remained silent on Burnham's free labour scheme for young people, setting a precedent that will be used to expand it.

In 2012, Usdaw, the main union covering retail workers, joined the Trades Union Congress and affiliated unions in opposing a similar Conservative government scheme to force unemployed people to work unpaid for six months or lose their benefits. They argued such "work experience" did not create real jobs. This caused Sainsbury's and other retailers to withdraw from the scheme.

Usdaw has assisted Sainsbury's through its redundancy programme, culling 3,000 jobs. The union celebrated this year's pay award of 5 percent for Sainsbury's 140,000 workers as "above inflation". It issued a joint press release with company chief executive Simon Roberts, who stated: "The increase reflects our commitment to rewarding our colleagues for their exceptional service and productivity."

Simon Roberts claimed an annualised salary of £1,008,910 in 2025/26, part of total remuneration of £5.43 million. It would take a full-time Sainsbury's shopfloor worker earning the national rate of £13.23 per hour around 40 years to earn his annualised salary; Roberts' total remuneration equals around 200 years of their earnings.

The fight against corporate restructuring to defend every job must be joined to the demand for genuine full-time employment for youth at Sainsbury's and across all sectors and industries.

Retail—the largest private-sector employer in the UK economy, employing around 3 million workers directly—shed 74,000 jobs in 2025. A significant factor in this jobs cull has been the use of automation via AI marketing, stock-management tools and self-service checkouts.

The same technology weaponised under capitalism to maximise profits must be used to lessen the burden of work, reduce the length of the working day and provide the basis for secure and increased employment opportunities. This means democratic workers' control of production as part of a broader reorganisation of society on a socialist basis.

This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the International Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, to provide workers and youth with the means to challenge the domination of the corporate oligarchy and its squandering of society's wealth on the destructive purposes of militarism and war.

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