

Trades Union Congress uses “Burnham bounce” to fall into line with more austerity and war

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This year’s Trades Union Congress (TUC) was presented by Britain’s pseudo-left tendencies as an occasion that would demonstrate a changed relationship between the trade unions and the Labour government under Prime Minister Andy Burnham. Instead, it confirmed that the relationship established under Keir Starmer remains one of mutual support for austerity and war.

The pro-worker rhetoric of the assembled bureaucracy during the four-day event in Brighton, September 13–16, rang hollow. None of the resolutions adopted were based on mobilising the working class against mounting social inequality, attacks on democratic rights, anti-migrant chauvinism and, most acutely, escalating war.

Instead, the congress used the so-called “Burnham bounce”, a slight uptick in support for Labour sans Starmer, to consolidate the bureaucracy’s corporatist relations with the government and big business.

The annual event has long ceased to occupy a meaningful place in working-class political life, and the TUC’s representation of 5.3 million workers is in the role of an industrial policemen and opponent of class struggle.

The cynicism of the union bureaucracy was summed up by TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak’s opening remarks. He paid lip service to outsourced workers “feeding our patients, protecting our public and cleaning our trains”, bounced from “one private company to another” on insecure work and inferior terms before declaring, “Time to end the outsourcing rip-off. Time for real public services, not private profit.”

Nowak inhabits an entirely different world from the “colleagues” that he spoke of meeting two months earlier at an NHS hospital. His estimated remuneration of £167,000 plus expenses places him in the top 10 percent of income earners. He is the leading representative of the privileged stratum of trade union bureaucrats who have facilitated the explosion in private-sector contracts under Labour since it came to power in 2024, with “soft facilities” contracts covering cleaning, catering and security rising from £3.5 to £6.6 billion. And it is in this capacity that he has taken up a position as non-executive director of the Bank of England.

The bureaucracy peddled the lie that Starmer’s pro-business and most right-wing Labour government in history would fulfil its promise to “bring about the biggest wave of insourcing of public services in a generation.” It is now attempting to revive this discredited claim under Burnham and his fraudulent promise to end 40 years of “neoliberalism.”

Burnham’s “public ownership” policy is in fact modelled on Tony Blair’s “Third Way” public-private partnerships, which saddled National Health Service hospitals with crippling debt and led to service cuts, and on his franchise model as Mayor of Greater Manchester where public transport services were carved up among private operators.

But even this has barely survived his entering Downing Street. Burnham already performed a U-turn on his flagship pledge to bring Thames Water into public ownership, leaving the company under a private consortium responsible for mass pollution while looting billions in profit. This will be the first of many assurances to the bond markets of fiscal discipline and loyalty to the financial oligarchy.

Even as the TUC met, Burnham was issuing denials that he was a traditional “tax and spend” socialist, saying in response that this October’s budget would be “challenging... We will take difficult decisions to make sure the economy remains on track.”

His Chancellor John Healey—a former defence minister under Starmer—told the *Financial Times*, via intermediaries, that “international factors are weighing heavily on his Budget planning, including the advance of Houthi rebels on the Red Sea coast of Yemen and the escalation of fighting in Ukraine.”

Indicating the prioritising of military spending, an ally explained that “John knows this better than anyone with his international outlook from defence and is using it as a basis for some early thinking into the Budget.”

The insincere claim that Burnham would represent a departure from Starmer was used by the union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left hangers-on to cement and justify their own alliance with the Labour government. This serves to sow confusion and demobilise the broad layers of workers and youth seeking an alternative to a party of austerity, repression

and war.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) interviewed TUC delegates about their enthusiasm for Burnham and preference for “Andy” under the headline “Bosses demand Burnham slashes public spending as inflation rises”, describing the feel-good factor among lower-ranking union bureaucrats as “entirely understandable.”

After conceding that “Burnham has been a godsend for the trade union leaders who don’t want to lead a fight,” the SWP proceeded to call on workers to rely on the same bureaucracy to organise “resistance—on the picket lines and streets—that takes on the bosses and their profit system” to “deliver change. That means activists organising at the base of the unions for a fightback—and pushing leaders into action.”

Lobbying by the trade union bureaucracy of the Burnham government has nothing to do with mobilising workers. This was typified by carried Motion 24, presented by Unite on “Industrial and economic policy”. Its calls for public ownership of water and energy are subordinated to trade-war and militarist policies, demanding “‘buy British’ procurement rules to support UK jobs and deepen national security”. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham, presented by the pseudo-left as a militant workers’ leader, has been among the most vocal advocates of increased military spending.

Nowak attacked far-right Reform UK leader Nigel Farage but did so to promote economic nationalism. He called “to Save British Industry... While Nigel Farage cheers on his mate in the White House while his tariffs are destroying jobs in the UK.”

This is the economic nationalism, pitting British workers against their class brothers and sisters internationally while the bureaucracy works with employers to enforce competitiveness.

The alignment of the bureaucracy and pseudo-left with Burnham is most starkly exposed on the issue of war. Burnham became prime minister in a palace coup supported by big business, who had concluded that Starmer had proved himself incapable of simultaneously escalating war abroad and attacking the working class at home through deeper austerity.

At the 2025 conference, under Starmer, the pseudo-left presented union officials as shifting TUC policy towards “Wages not warfare”. This year they submitted a watered-down version of the same policy. Motion 37—moved by the University and College Union and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union last year—committed the movement to reverse the 2022 policy of increased military spending, “which would mean less money for our education, health, and councils, and the green transition.” It warned that “ever-higher spending on arms risks signalling approval of a wider drive to war, in the dangerous context of renewed great-power rivalry” and claimed to stand “in the best traditions against militarisation.”

This year it was replaced by Motion 75, “Building real security”, moved by UCU and easily adopted because it was so vague and did not conflict with the agenda of the Burnham government. It removed every reference to “war” or

“remilitarisation” and said nothing about the government’s collusion with the illegal US-Israeli military assault on Iran, the Gaza genocide and escalating of the NATO proxy war with Russia in Ukraine.

Its call for “prioritising investment in workers and public services” replaced any stated opposition to increased military spending.

The TUC’s Palestine motion was another mealy-mouthed statement, primarily aimed at glorifying the limited sanctions imposed by the Burnham government on illegal settlements in the West Bank, while leaving intact Britain’s wider trade, security and military relationship with Israel—including continued British production of F-35 components for Israeli fighter jets used in the murderous siege of Gaza. The call for the government “to impose wide-ranging sanctions on Israel” will continue to be a dead letter.

The TUC’s real attitude to war was exemplified by Motion 78 Solidarity with Ukrainian workers, which was also carried. Drawn up by the near defunct National Union of Mineworkers, the resolution extensively denounced Russia’s 2022 seizure of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, as a “component of Russia’s murderous war”, before reaffirming the support of the TUC for Ukraine and its struggle against Putin “assisted by Trump.”

There could not be a clearer declaration in favour of continuing a war that has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands, and which threatens the survival of the planet.

A genuine fight against austerity and war is only possible through a fundamental break from the bureaucratic apparatus of the TUC and its member unions that acts as an extension of employers, government and the state in suppressing the class struggle.

The next stage of working-class resistance, whether inside or outside the existing unions, must break the bureaucracy’s grip or face defeat. The fundamental task posed is the building of rank-and-file committees, capable of mobilising workers across workplaces and communities and uniting them in a conscious fight against the capitalist system and for socialism.



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