Burnham’s EU deal: British imperialism realigns for war

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22 November 2026

The agreements signed by Prime Minister Andy Burnham with the European Union (EU) in Brussels on November 20 are not the reversal of Brexit nationalism widely declared by the media. They represent a reorientation of the British ruling class to rearming Europe, amid a deepening rift with Washington over trade and, above all, the war against Russia.

The deal was struck at the second EU–UK summit, where European Council President António Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen met Burnham. The first EU–UK summit was hosted by Keir Starmer in London in May 2025, which launched what he described as an EU “reset”.

Burnham’s agreement with the EU has been portrayed, and largely greeted, by the liberal press and much of the City of London as a tentative start to addressing the economically disastrous impact of Brexit and its undermining of the global standing of British imperialism. Burnham declared that the Brexit “we were given has not worked” and that Britain had “lost more than we gained.”

“It’s welcome news that Labour has reopened doors that the Conservatives slammed shut,” the *Guardian* wrote, headlining its editorial, “Burnham’s reset cannot be the final destination.” The *Financial Times* headlined its own report, “Burnham begins to undo Brexit with landmark EU deal.”

The agreement’s content is modest. A common food-safety area, due to begin in March 2028, will remove border checks on animal and plant products in return for Britain aligning with EU food rules. Britain’s emissions-trading scheme will be linked to the EU’s, exempting British steel and other exports from Brussels’ carbon border tax. A youth scheme will allow up to 100,000 people aged 18 to 31 from each side to live and work across the Channel for up to three years, from 2030 at the latest.

The Treasury estimates the gain at 0.5 percent of GDP—a fraction of the 4 to 8 percent lost through Brexit.

Moreover, the agreement depends on a deal on tuition fees for EU students within six months, and the food agreement contains a penalty clause requiring whichever side withdraws to pay compensation, aimed at a possible future Reform UK or Conservative government.

The deal’s more fundamental significance was spelt out by von der Leyen at the press conference that followed the summit. Turning to security, she began, “Only yesterday, we met in Berlin for the Coalition of the Willing.” She went on, “We will only end Russia’s war of aggression with unity and strength.”

The Coalition of the Willing is an informal grouping of about 34 countries, mostly European, set up in March 2025 under British and French leadership to provide Ukraine with “security guarantees”. It has become a vehicle for the European powers’ pursuit of the war independently of, and against, Washington.

On the same day as the coalition summit in Berlin, US President Donald Trump met with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in Shenzhen on the sidelines of the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit. Berlin’s gathering in support of Kyiv demanded a European seat in any “peace” negotiations—a call accompanied by stepped-up drone attacks on Russia. The coalition pledged continued military and financial support for the war against Russia and declared its readiness to deploy a European-led Multinational Force Ukraine post-ceasefire, insisting that borders must not be changed by force.

The EU trade deal and the war summit are two components of a single policy. At the Coalition of the Willing summit, Burnham unveiled a £260 million package of long-range drones for Ukraine, more than 1,000 weapons, some with a range of over 1,000 kilometres, and insisted that no settlement could be reached without Kyiv and the European powers.

After meeting with Burnham, von der Leyen said that the Security and Defence Partnership agreed last year was being taken further, with closer work on “defence capabilities and military mobility.” Costa praised Britain’s leadership of the Coalition of the Willing and insisted that “there can be no strong defence without a stronger economy.”

When the Brexit referendum was called in 2016, the Socialist Equality Party called for an active boycott. We explained that both the Remain and Leave campaigns were led by Thatcherite forces advancing austerity, militarism and attacks on democratic rights. Our opposition to the EU was from the left, not the right.

Washington and the major European powers feared that Brexit would unravel the EU and jeopardise NATO’s war plans against Russia. A decade on, Burnham is making the same case from the standpoint of British imperialism.

In his Lord Mayor’s Banquet speech on November 16, he described Brexit as the first domino in a global turn to isolationism and protectionism. Brexit was “exactly what our enemies wanted. Russia wanted disunity within NATO and a weaker Europe.” Britain’s “standing in the world,” he complained, had diminished.

Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband told Labour’s annual conference that Britain’s future on economics, defence and security lies in a

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deeper partnership with the EU, adding, “We will never, never give in to Russia’s threats.”

Brexit is seen by ever broader layers in ruling circles as detrimental to British imperialism’s strategic interests. The 2016 vote left British capitalism without a stable government, producing six prime ministers in a decade. It also left Britain isolated just as Trump’s “America First” agenda fatally undermined the “special relationship” on which its world role had rested since 1945.

Britain is highly exposed to Trump’s trade war measures. The average US tariff on British goods has risen from 0.8 percent to 7.2 percent, with Section 232 tariffs on steel, aluminium and cars and new Section 301 tariffs announced by Trump in July.

The minimal trade deal negotiated by former Tory prime minister and Brexit architect Boris Johnson also leaves British industry vulnerable to the EU’s own protectionism, above all the “Made in Europe” procurement rules being drawn up in Brussels.

The decisive factor animating Burnham’s own “reset”, however, is the Ukraine war. Trump’s deal on October 9 to buy Russian diesel, his calls for Volodymyr Zelensky to be replaced as president and reported threats to suspend NATO weapons supplies have deepened the deep rift between Washington and the European powers. The Shenzhen meeting confirmed European fears that Washington is preparing a carve-up with Moscow and Beijing over their heads.

Burnham’s turn to Europe is a decision to pursue British imperialism’s predatory interests against Russia within a rearming European bloc. As the WSWS warned when he took office in July, Burnham would “continue and intensify Britain’s participation” in the NATO war against Russia, paid for by cutting social spending.

Washington has made its hostility clear. Even before Burnham took office, the US ambassador, Warren Stephens, warned that closer ties with Brussels would not be viewed favourably in the White House. US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer has accused London of choosing Brussels over Washington, warning that its alignment with EU rules was blocking the expansion of last year’s US–UK trade deal.

The food agreement aligns British standards with EU rules, shutting out the American agribusiness exports Washington has pursued. Retaliation could take the form of further tariffs, a frozen trade deal, and pressure on Britain’s dependence on US nuclear and intelligence systems. Trump’s National Security Strategy commits his administration to cultivating resistance to “Europe’s current trajectory”, including backing for the continent’s far-right “patriotic” parties.

The Brexiteer right will act as the political instrument for any US intervention. Nigel Farage of Reform UK has vowed to scrap the agreement if he becomes prime minister. With its support falling and five elections lost since September, Reform UK is reportedly considering an electoral pact with Rupert Lowe’s Restore. The latter’s conditions for such a pact include the deportation of millions of immigrants, a ban on the burqa and a referendum on restoring the death penalty. Conservative Party leader Kemi Badenoch has also pledged to reverse Burnham’s deal.

Sentiment has shifted on Brexit as the claims that it would lead to increased social spending and economic growth have evaporated. Polls now show that 58 percent believe leaving the EU was wrong and 63 percent regard Brexit as a failure. Polling reported over the weekend found support for Labour would rise by more than 7 per cent if its next manifesto pledged to rejoin the EU. The Brexit issue remains a focus for whipping up nationalism and chauvinism.

Voting intention shows deep alienation from all the official parties remains. Labour stands at 27 percent in the latest YouGov poll, the Liberal Democrats at 11, the Greens at 9, the Scottish National Party at 3 and Plaid Cymru at 1—giving pro-EU parties a clear majority. But the Conservatives at 23 and Reform at 21 still hold a significant share of the vote. Labour will continue spouting the anti-migrant xenophobia on which the far-right feeds. Burnham hailed expanded data sharing with the EU and broader “collaboration on tackling illegal immigration” among the deal’s supposed benefits.

Most fundamentally, Burnham’s pro-EU position offers no progressive political alternative to the Tories and the far right. He is moving toward integration with a trade and military bloc dominated by governments committed to savage austerity, trade, and military war, no matter their nominal political character. And Europe’s ruling elite are determined that workers will pay for their predatory designs, through the destruction of essential services, job losses and the destruction of democratic rights, while young people face being dragged into war as cannon fodder.

Inside the EU or not, the ruling class and all its contending factions offer only nationalism, militarism and an onslaught on living standards to pay for rearmament and war.

Europe is now the scene of mass protests and strikes in country after country, mobilising millions against social cuts, war and the rise of the far right. Workers in Britain must turn to Europe’s workers, especially the young generation. The only road forward is the unification of the working class across Europe and internationally against nationalism, war and austerity in a common struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.



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