CHARTIST

For democratic socialism Labour Party Conference 2026 Free



What we stand for

Andy Burnham wants to break from decades of neoliberalism. However, that means no continuity Starmerism in John Healey's budget. What will the PM actually propose? It will have to involve serious investment in public services and not cuts in essential welfare for the sick and disabled. The NHS, schools and wider social infrastructure have been starved of cash for years. It's also vital to get the million young people not in employment or education into paid work. There are huge opportunities in Labour's house building programme, in the work needed for green energy, in tech industries and social care to provide employment. Plus it's sound economics to borrow to invest in the public realm, which pays back over time. Above all it's vital to tax wealth and assets sitting in land and property alongside windfall taxes on excessive profits. This would mark a break from austerity and the dead hand of unregulated market forces.

If devolution is going to mean anything it must involve not just decision-making but also resources being deployed to local and regional government.

Nationalist populists and neo-fascists on the right, allied to big tech, are keen to reduce taxes and slash services while blaming migrants for our ills: anything to keep the heat off the rich and big capital. Labour needs to stand with the progressive forces of community activists, trade unions, climate campaigners, anti-racists and anti-poverty workers to build a powerful movement for progressive change. Burnham sowed the seeds in his Makerfield byelection win. Now comes the hard work of making a real difference to millions of people's lives and ending the blight of 'market is right' thinking.

In this special we outline the aims of Chartist over the years and focus on what is to be done today.

Subscribe to CHARTIST:
£25 ordinary subscription
£45 supporter subscription
(6 issues) Visit
www.chartist.org.uk/subscribe for details

ISSN - 0968 786 ISSUE 05>
9 770968 786001 >

What is CHARTIST?

Putting democratic socialism back on the agenda

Democratic socialism is back on the agenda after a 45 year long period in which free market politics have dominated the planet. Multinational corporate capitalism has ruled over nations and regions, demanding submission to their profit before every other consideration of the material needs and well-being of entire populations.

The outcome has been paradoxical: growth in science and technology has created potential for advances in the quality of life for all people across the world, but with this running in combination with growing poverty and inequality for millions of people.

The expansion of capitalism has also increased reliance on carbon emitting fossil fuels, producing the climate crisis which now threatens the biosphere on which all life depends. Developments in artificial intelligence led by irresponsible 'tech bros' corporates, are throwing up even graver threats to humanity's future. Meanwhile centuries-old injustices, with gender oppression and racism to the forefront, remain unresolved.

Throughout the 20th century, millions of people have looked towards socialism as the way forward. For some, hopes were invested in the society that emerged from the Russian Revolution of 1917 which advocated the 'soviet' form of socialism, or communism, that later made advances in China, eastern Europe and south-east Asia. But subsequent history showed that the potential of this version of socialism to be genuinely transformative was limited by its failure to develop a democratic form of government which ensured that the economies it had brought under social control functioned in the interests of the mass of the people,

An equally important part of the history of socialism to the present day is that of the social democratic parties which still exist as major electoral forces in many parts of the world today. In Europe they owe their credibility to the welfare states established after the end of the second world war. They have provided a rich and complex history which cannot be considered or dismissed in any glib way.

CHARTIST has covered developments in the UK's social democratic party – the Labour Party – over the 55 years of its publication mainly from the standpoint of active participants in its internal life and public campaigns. Millions of people have been actively involved in efforts to secure the change promised by social democratic parties, even though judgment in their performance in government is so often negative.

The experience of trade union movements allied to social democratic parties illustrates this well: hoping that at some point they will become more responsive to the interests of working people. But in recent decades we have seen that trust in parties of the Labour-type have been diminishing and support at the ballot box has been in steep decline.

We need to deepen our understanding of reasons why parties of the Labour-type are losing the support they once had in working class communities. An important part of the answer is that social democracy across the world has lost the sharpness of its critique of capitalism as an overall system and has come to see it as just a part of the range of factors that need to be managed by supposedly competent state functionaries.

Contending with neoliberalism

This loss of critical perspective is seen most clearly in the way social democratic parties shaped up to changes in the structure of capitalism after the second world war, creating a surge towards accommodation with neoliberal ideology in the 1970s.

The three decades of post-war economic growth, from 1945 to 1970, and the advances made towards greater social equality started to encounter resistance from multinational corporations that wanted to cut their links with the national states which fostered their growth in earlier times.

So-called tripartite arrangements which attempted to forge a partnership between governments, corporations and trades unions representing workers' interests were seen as fetters on profit which the ideology of neoliberalism insisted was the sole legitimate objective of business.

As the global economy moved

Democratic revolution

Our 19C namesakes fought for the Six Points of the Charter and 'something more'. We have continued the struggle for greater democracy in elections, championing electoral reform (see Chartist specials 2021, 2022, 2023), supporting Labour for a New Democracy. In workplaces, we have promoted worker's control and consumer voice in public ownership. Nationalisation without worker and user voice will simply mean a return to top-down bureaucratic structures. On wider constitutional democracy we've campaigned for abolition of the House of Lords (Glyn Ford Chartist 338) and for a republic (Ken Ritchie Chartist 241). Socialism can only be achieved by government and extra-parliamentary action. Building solidarity through community organisations, trade unions and coops can pave the way. Strengthening devolved local government, as espoused by Andy Burnham, providing a stronger voice for local people is vital.

Internationalism

Workers of the world unite is an old socialist adage. It still holds. For decades Chartist has supported anti-colonial struggles particularly in the Six Counties. We have also stood squarely for Palestinian statehood, an end to violent subjugation by Israel and in solidarity against illegal occupation of West Bank and Gaza, and a full arms embargo. We have supported Standing Together (see Robin Arnfield, Jon Lansman and Andy Gregg in recent Chartists) and other movements seeking to unite Palestinian Arabs and Jews in securing a just peace. We have also been part of Ukraine Solidarity Campaign backing Ukraine's struggle against Russian imperialism campaigning for humanitarian and military aid to secure a sovereign, independent Ukraine with effective sanctions against Putin's autocratic state. See articles by Yulia Yurchenko, Sian Norris, Chris Ford and Pete Duncan and more. We similarly campaigned against the brutal Assad regime in Syria, and its Russian backers and the US/UK led war against Iraq. All forms of imperialism must be opposed.

into the 1970s and beyond, the largest capitalist companies began to relocate their production process to regions with lower-cost workforces and less stringent tax and regulatory regimes than mature capitalist states. Oil price shocks in the 1970s increased the price of energy in the developed countries, accelerating the process. The idea of freeing capitalist businesses to move without restrictions across the planet appealed most immediately to centre-right political parties long-steeped in the ideology of free markets and absence of government regulation.

But a version of neoliberalism also took root in centre-left social democratic parties prepared to ditch the old tripartite governance framework in favour of a new partnership with capital. What was aimed for was a licence granted to companies to move freely towards regimes which offered maximum economic advantage in return for taxation of the expected increased profits, the revenues from which would support higher spending on infrastructure, education and health services, allowing a 'tickle-down' effect to spread wealth across the population.

In the UK this leftist version of neoliberalism took the form of 'third way' politics during the years of Tony Blair's leadership of 'New Labour'.

CHARTIST emerged during these years as an expression of the efforts of activists within the labour movement to reconsider what socialism meant at the turn of the millennium. Supporters of the magazine looked forward to a modernised socialism which would aim to find the political and social resources needed to effect fundamental change within civil society. The magazine featured articles which reflected these debates and lines of inquiry which urged moving 'beyond the fragments' and strategies which encompassed activism 'in and against the state'.

Meanwhile the mainstream political agenda moved decisively to the right during the long years of Thatcherism in the UK, Reaganism in the US, and their attendant pro-market ideologies in other parts of the world.

The de-industrialisation of the countries of mature capitalism and the financialisaton of what remained of their economies continued on course, punctuated periodically by crisis points caused by the inflation of assets circulating across the global system. 'Tech bubbles' led the way in revealing these tendencies towards instability, but the clincher came with the banking crisis of 2007 which developed into full-blown recession in 2008. This marked a fundamental challenge to hopes of a benign version of neoliberal economic management which had been promoted by the Labour Party and its European co-thinkers. It showed that growth across these years had been driven by the illusionary value of financial assets which collapsed when their toxic character came to light.

However, the hollowness of neoliberalism had been the subject of critical debate outside the political mainstream for many years and had a strong base among activists concerned with the degraded state of the natural environment and the growth of poverty and inequality across the population. This critique had a powerful capacity to generate social protest, some of which grew to explosive levels, most famously in the opposition to a meeting the World Trade Organisation in 1999 which saw international nongovernmental organisations concerned with labour issues, the environment, student groups, and religion-based bodies working in alliance. As more anti-capitalist challenges followed the beginnings of a newly-invigorated and informed popular socialist movement began to be seen.

The economy, stupid



'You can't serve two masters', the old saying goes. Labour's leaders should recognise this clash between fulsome pledges to big business and aspirations to reverse neoliberalism and empower consumers, local government and communities (see Bryn Jones, September's Chartist). John Healey wants to prioritise 'growth' above all else by backing all business investment (including wasteful AI data centres); while restricting public borrowing by observing 'fiscal discipline'. There are ways out of this self-imposed bind. Contrary to Healey's almost surreal avowal that cutting borrowing is 'a matter of values' it is a myth. Borrowing does not deter growth as he claims. Japan has far higher government debt but still achieves higher growth. As Ann Pettifor showed (July/August Chartist 341), investors in UK bonds are only acting on a rational fear that the Bank of England will raise interest rates, leaving them with less profitable long-term government bonds. Even if the Bank cannot be deterred from its largely unsuccessful rate-raising to combat inflation, the fiscal deficit could be covered by raising £110 billion of extra business, wealth and windfall taxes as recommended by Labour peer Prem Sikka (September/Oct. Chartist 342). If Andy Burnham really wants to retrieve public and community controls over necessities such as water and energy then transfer from the over-finacialised neoliberal sphere into the social economy is essential.

The place of the British Labour Party

Mainstream social democratic parties, and particularly the British Labour Party, were hit hard by the collapse of the neoliberal ideology in which they were so heavily invested. The 2010 general election saw defeat at the hands of a Conservative-led coalition, latterly a majority Conservative government, which rolled out a programme of extreme fiscal austerity to stabilise a deep crisis for British capitalism.

Labour was blamed for spending too much on health and welfare programmes during its years in government and left a bill that now had to be settled by a pro-business, right-of-centre administration that would cut costs. Culprits were found for the country's predicament in the form of migrants – the numbers of whom had substantially increased under Labour – and the role that membership of the European Union played in framing policy options. The general election in 2015 showed that the Conservatives had the upper hand in the argument resulting in a Tory-majority government.

Labour made marginal efforts to counter austerity under its leader in opposition, Ed Milliband. But it failed to capture the more radical moods that existed among the victims of austerity, particularly millennials who were now being locked out of home ownership, crippled by soaring rents and facing much-reduced opportunities for rewarding careers. Building this relationship was left to Miliband's successor following his resignation in 2015, the veteran left winger, Jeremy Corbyn.

Corbyn used the early period of his leadership to develop a competent reformist message inviting millennials to join the party, campaign against austerity and rebuild the public sector through investment in services and the nationalisation of key sectors of the economy.

Against Corbyn, a vigorous right wing populism emerged which worked to ramp up concern with immigration and the role the

EU played in important areas of policymaking. The Conservative government had made an inept attempt to contain anti-EU sentiment, but this backfired with an ill-judged decision to hold the referendum on membership of the Union in 2016 which resulted in a vote for Brexit.

Labour was thoroughly disorientated by this outcome and contributed little to the ensuring debate on how damage to the country's trading relations with markets in Europe could be protected.

A rift with the traditional working class voting base for the party, which had come to distrust the EU for a melange of reasons, deepened. For a brief period, the extent of the developing crisis in popular support for Labour was disguised by the results of the general election of 2017 where the Conservatives lost their majority and Corbyn came close to an unexpected victory. But the prospect of an electorally popular Corbynite party simply galvanised an establishment which hankered after a return to Blairite days. As the factions battled it out, recent success in building a mass membership base was reversed and tens of thousands left Labour, deeply disillusioned with the turn politics had taken.

Social democratic politics in Britain and elsewhere has remained in a state of flux since this date. Sir Keir Starmer was propelled into leadership after the Corbyn-led party suffered a decisive defeat in the 2019 general election on the basis of residual hopes that a return to the days of Blairite New Labour was still possible. Measured against the incompetent performance of Boris Johnson's government, exceptionally challenged as it was by the corona virus pandemic of that period, the idea that Labour might furnish an acceptable alternative administration was encouraged. The theme of 'competence' dominated the general election campaign of 2024 and facilitated a remarkable victory for Starmer, winning a majority of 172 over the combined opposition. But this outcome was distorted by the vagaries of a first-past-the-post voting system operating in conditions where multiple parties could contemplate support of sizeable parts of the electorate. The effect was to gift a triumph for Starmer described as 'a mile wide but an inch deep' on just 33.7% of the vote.

Initial optimism that Starmer might lead to recovery of Labour's fortunes were dashed in a series of policy missteps which undermined any hopes that his government would be different from its recent forerunners. The rift between the historic alliance of educated progressives and what was now designated 'the traditional working classes' in numerous commentaries remained unmended and even deepened as support for Starmer's government continued to flatline. Working class voters were showing a propensity to protest by voting for Nigel Farage's populist right wing Reform-UK. Progressives and discontented millennials turned towards the Green Party to register their hope that things might get better.

Andy Burnham's elevation to party leader and prime minister represents another swing of the pendulum in the fortunes of British social democracy. It is encouraging that his platform encompasses many of the points covered in this review of the recent past – the wrong turn towards neoliberalism (or Thatcherism) in the late 1970s; privatisation of businesses and services providing foundational infrastructure on which prosperity depends; over-centralisation of the British state and reliance of markets in place of accountable government to direct the economy have produced consequences which we now experience as flatlining productivity and growth, continued loss of industrial capacity, expanding inequality, and diminishing prospects for younger people.

CHARTIST has been setting out an analysis of these developments across five decades which draws directly on the experiences of grassroots activists and campaigners.

In its editorial policy it asserts the fact that what we now need to address the multiple crises of the modern world is more democracy and more socialism. Our political systems need to bring the needs of the mass of people to the forefront of policy and in doing so, to displace the avaricious demands of corporate capitalism for profit and resources which now dominates life.

We are constantly open to contributions across a wide range of issues – politics, economics, social justice, cultural life – which relay the ideas and experiences of grassroots activists and communities. Chartist welcomes all opportunities to work in broad left alliances. It welcomes the Mainstream initiative working to unite the left across the Labour party and strengthen the influence of progressive and democratic ideas.

If this is how you think about the world today, visit our website www.chartist.org.uk, subscribe to our bi-monthly, write to us and let's see how we can work together. C

Anti-racism



CHARTIST stands in the tradition of working class internationalism. We oppose efforts to divide working people on the basis of nationality, ethnicity and religion.

Fighting back against racism means keeping pace with the ways in which divisive ideologies develop and mutate over time, moving from crude white supremacism through to structural forms which are administered in areas like education, employment and immigration. The leading commentator, Gary Younge, has contributed to CHARTIST on these issues. On immigration, Don Flynn has drawn attention to Labour's frustrating incapacity to develop policies consistent with human rights. Shaista Azizz, a prominent Muslim feminist voice, has set out the reasons why communities across the country need to take a firm stance against attempts to demonise Islam.

Environmental Action



Chartist has covered green issues for many years, notably in our regular Greenwatch page; we recognise the seriousness of the climate and biodiversity emergencies where the risks of tipping points include sea level rises, extreme weather and species extinctions.

Industrial development has implicitly assumed limitless resources and capacity to absorb waste products; neo-liberal capitalism has supercharged this process, while self-professed 'socialist' economies from the USSR to China have also been extraordinarily destructive. All economic activity must operate within planetary boundaries (see Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics).

We value critiques on the left from William Morris through EF Schumacher (Small is Beautiful) and the Lucas Aerospace Plan.

Exploitation of new North Sea gas fields, nuclear power and carbon capture and storage technologies are a dangerous diversion from the need for a rapid transition to a net zero emission economy. As socialists and internationalists we know that poorer communities are often hardest hit and we espouse a Just Transition with workers' support - see the Green New Deal.

Published by
Chartist Publications
PO Box 52751 London EC2P 2XF

Printed by
Blue Design & Print
Email: gary@bluedesignandprint.co.uk

Written by
Don Flynn, Mike Davis, Nigel Doggett and Bryn Jones
Cover: Martin Rowson **Production**: Ferdousur Rehman