Starmer routs UK Labour "left" over vote on two-child benefit cap

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Just seven out of 411 Labour MPs voted on Tuesday to scrap the punitive two-child limit on welfare benefits introduced by Britain's Conservative government in 2015. In total, 363 Labour MPs voted to keep 1.6 million children and 400,000 households in poverty.

The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) says removing the cap on benefits, which costs affected UK households up to £3,455 a year, would make a "significant difference" to one million children in poverty, and would lift 300,000 children out of poverty altogether.

A Scottish National Party (SNP) amendment to abolish the two-child benefit cap was lost 363 votes to 103 in the House of Commons, delivering a majority of 260 for Labour's legislative agenda as set out in last week's King's Speech.

But Labour's victory was deemed insufficient by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, who moved within hours to suspend all seven Labour MPs—Apsana Begum, Richard Burgon, Ian Byrne, Imran Hussain, Rebecca Long-Bailey, John McDonnell and Zarah Sultana—who voted for the SNP amendment.

Tuesday's vote has underscored not only the authoritarian and nakedly pro-business character of the incoming Labour government. It has confirmed the bankruptcy of all claims made by Jeremy Corbyn and his allies in the Socialist Campaign Group (SCG) of Labour MPs that the party can be pushed to the left. Indeed, 11 members of the SCG voted to keep the two-child benefit cap.

An Early Day Motion (EDM) sponsored by Labour backbenchers on July 17 that called for the cap's immediate scrapping already showed the direction of travel. It attracted support from just 20 Labour MPs among 38 signatories. Of these 20 Labour signatories, 13 U-turned on Tuesday, abstaining or voting against the SNP's amendment. Those voting against included Grahame Morris (Easington), Dawn Butler (Brent East), Kate Osborne (Jarrow and Gateshead East), Emma Lewill-Buck (South Shields) and Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole).

Labour MPs who abstained included Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill), Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth), Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington), Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East), and Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East). Diane Abbott was absent due to unspecified "personal reasons".

Ahead of the vote, Starmer had announced a "review" of benefits to stave off a rebellion by Labour backbenchers. But he has repeatedly made clear the government's iron-clad commitment to maintaining the two-child cap and similar vindictive measures against the poor, citing "fiscal rules". In the wake of Tuesday's vote, Chancellor Rachel Reeves defended the government's support for the cap, demanding of her critics: "where's the money going to come from?"

Reeves said it would cost £3 billion to axe the cap, a figure dwarfed by corporate tax cuts backed by Labour and the £52 billion lavished on the military. Labour has confirmed it will hand over £3 billion annually for the war in Ukraine and will renew the Trident nuclear weapons programme at an estimated cost of £200 billion. All part of Starmer's "cast iron commitment" to spending 2.5 percent of GDP on defence, an extra £75 billion by 2030.

Labour's support for the two-child limit on welfare places it to the right of fascistic sections of the Tory Party and of Nigel Farage's Reform UK, which claims publicly to oppose the policy, though its MPs abstained on Tuesday's vote.

On Monday, former Tory Home Secretary Suella Braverman attacked "the total failure of the Labour government to deal with child poverty, telling the House of Commons "I believe this cap is aggravating child poverty, and it's time for it to go. Now I know the argument 'don't have children if you can't afford them'.

For me, that's not compassionate, it's not fair. It's not the right thing to do."

Needless to say, Braverman, whose name is a byword for political reaction for her brutal crackdown on refugees and criminalisation of Gaza protests, is not motivated by humanitarian concerns. Her strategy, like that of Reform UK, is to seize on the social distress and anger produced by Labour's pro-business policies and shift this in a far-right direction.

"Almost a form of eugenics"

Labour's support for capping child benefits is a form of right-wing social engineering that criminalises the poor.

On Tuesday, Sir Michael Marmot, Professor of Epidemiology and Public Health at University College London, told LBC Radio: "It's almost a form of eugenics saying if poor families choose to have extra children, we're going to clobber them. If you consign something like 1.6 million children to further hardship, that's going to affect their trajectory for the rest of their lives."

The policy also targets immigrant families, with the Muslim Council of Britain stating after Tuesday's vote that the two-child cap "disproportionately affects families in low socio-economic groups, including religious minorities such as Muslims". Of the 10 poorest constituencies in England, eight have Muslim populations of more than 20 percent and 60 percent of Muslim families have three children or more.

Not only did the cap remove more than £5 billion from the poorest families since 2017, the number of abortions also increased. Abortions in England and Wales rose sharply from 185,596 in 2016 to 207,384 in 2019—an 11.7 percent increase. Abortion rates for women who already had two children experienced the sharpest rise. Additional research by *Canary* found the poorest women were having abortions at more than twice the rate as the richest.

Charities say the benefits system and welfare sanctioning have contributed to 4.6 million living in poverty, up by one million since 2010-11. Increased child poverty is also fuelling a mental health crisis, with one in five young people aged 8-25 suffering a diagnosed mental health problem, according to a report published this week by the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition and Save the Children UK.

By aged 11, the poorest children are four times more likely to suffer mental health difficulties than the wealthiest.

Against such vicious measures, the vote by seven Labour MPs for a toothless SNP parliamentary motion does not even rise to the level of rebellion.

Not one of the suspended MPs has denounced Starmer or issued the call for mass protests against Labour's socially reactionary policies, let alone a break with this rotten party of NATO and the super-rich. They will sit dutifully in parliament for six months, when a review will determine their "future in the party" and when, as they are at pains to emphasise, they look forward to returning to the government benches.

Long-Bailey said she was "deeply saddened" to have lost the Labour whip, adding, "I will continue to work with the government". Suspended MP Zarah Sultana said she had "slept well" after her vote on the SNP's amendment, telling ITV's *Good Morning Britain*: "I look forward to many bills that will be coming forward in this government including nationalising rail, the new deal for working people".

McDonnell, who served as shadow chancellor under Jeremy Corbyn, rejected any fight against the government, appealing instead to Starmer's own nationalist mantra: "I don't like voting for other parties' amendments but I'm following Keir Starmer's example as he said put country before party."

Corbyn and newly elected independent MPs Ayoub Khan, Adnan Hussain, Iqbal Mohamed and Shockat Adam, issued a joint statement welcoming the suspended MPs: "We look forward to working closely with you as you represent your constituents more effectively than ever as Independent Members of Parliament."

Corbyn's letter fails to acknowledge that all seven MPs intend to remain members of the Labour Party and wish to resume their positions at the earliest opportunity. As ever, Corbyn himself refused to call for a break from Labour and the establishment of a socialist alternative based on the mobilisation of the working class, an outcome he is doing everything in his power to prevent.