

# Britain's Liberal Democrats meet behind metal barrier

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The Liberal Democrats are holding their spring conference in Sheffield, the home of the party's leader and deputy prime minister, Nick Clegg. As the austerity measures the party has drawn up in coalition with the Conservatives begin to impact on broad layers of workers, the former are gathering behind a steel fence erected around City Hall to protect those in attendance from the public.

The situation accurately reflects the public standing of the party. Its participation in the government has made it possible to bring forward the most sustained attack on the living standards and social rights of the working class in over 80 years.

Before the General Election last May, the Liberal Democrats were able to posture as being to the left of the Labour Party. Instead, they enabled the Conservative Party to form a government by entering a coalition with it and have proceeded to renege on almost all their pre-election promises—from scrapping university tuition fees, to the introduction of proportional representation and their policies on immigration and taxation. Their conduct spawned a new phrase, “to be Clegged”—which means something akin to being totally betrayed.

While the party claimed that every citizen would be better off under a Liberal government, they have presided over the trebling of tuition fees, the abolition of the Education Maintenance Allowance and a programme of cuts in welfare, health, education, pension and housing that will see central government funding being slashed by almost a third.

Now, during their conference of March 11 to March 13, a security operation is underway that will cost up to £2 million. This includes the erection of the eight-foot security barrier around City Hall by Betafence, a Sheffield-based firm that also provided security fencing

for a G8 summit in Italy.

A huge police presence is in place, including armed police. All of South Yorkshire's police force will be on standby, and extra police officers have been drafted in from West Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. Some 1,000 officers will be on duty over the weekend. Throughout the city centre, there will be an increased police presence patrolling on horseback, motorcycles and bicycles, as well as on foot. The county's helicopter and police dogs will also be on standby.

The fact that the Sheffield City Council is held by the Liberal Democrats and is implementing cuts affecting every household makes the situation tenser still.

The council announced that £200 million would be cut from the budget by 2015, £80 million this year alone, leading to 800 direct job losses and many more indirectly. The figure would be much higher if the council had not put so many services out to private tender, meaning it will not be directly responsible for redundancies and sackings.

One care home for the elderly is to be closed, and day centres are under review; the budget to all Sure Start Children's Centres is to be cut by 15 percent; funding for museums and galleries will be cut; the mobile library service is under review; a third of park rangers are to be axed; and parking fees and social care charges will be greatly increased.

The enormous resentment, even hatred, felt for the Liberal Democrats was evident in last week's Barnsley Central by-election, where the party's vote share tumbled from 17.28 percent to just 4.18 percent, and the Tories fell from 17.26 percent to 8.25 percent. The Liberal Democrats trailed in sixth, only 800 votes in front of the Monster Raving Loony Party, and had the humiliation of losing their deposit.

The Liberal Democrats will never recover from the

devastating exposure of their real political character as a result of having assumed office. But this will not lead them to retreat from their declaration of open warfare against the working class. Clegg and company take their orders from big business, which is insisting through its media mouthpieces that the Liberal Democrats stand firm.

No protest will make the Liberal Democrats see the “error of their ways”. And yet that is the political perspective of the demonstration that has been called by the Sheffield Anti-Cuts Alliance—an umbrella including all the pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, which also has its own Right To Work front.

This unprincipled alliance have called a demonstration under the slogan “Rage against the LibDems,” which does not raise any political demands—not even for the bringing down of the coalition government. By speaking only of the Liberal Democrats’ “betrayal”, they aim to redirect workers behind the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

In a letter to Sheffield’s *Star* newspaper, the Anti-Cuts Alliance protested the publication’s claim that it was organising “direct action” around the conference by boosting the credentials of the union leaders.

“We are in fact planning a massive peaceful protest with national speakers including UNITE General Secretary Len McCluskey and CWU Deputy General Secretary David Ward”, the letter said. “We are encouraging all Sheffielders who feel betrayed by Sheffield MP Nick Clegg and the LibDems to come along with their families and enjoy a positive and peaceful expression of protest on the day.”

There is no difference between Labour, the Liberal Democrats and any of the official parties. None of them answer to “the people”, or even those who voted for them. They answer solely to the super-rich.

During Labour’s most recent 13 years in office, its pro-big business agenda saw social inequality rise to historic levels. When the banks and financial system faced collapse in 2008, Labour again defended the financial oligarchy—handing over billions in public money, the cost of which working people are now having to pay. Today, not a single Labour council anywhere in the country is refusing to implement the cuts package handed down from central government.

As for the trade unions, they haven’t lifted a finger to oppose the cuts and have done everything to prevent any mobilisation of the working class. If trade union leaders address protests, it is only to cover up their collusion with the austerity measures that could not be pushed through without their assistance.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that a genuine fight back against austerity can only be carried through on the basis of a socialist programme.

Not a single cut can be implemented. It is the super-rich and the financial oligarchy that must be made to pay for the financial crisis through a system of progressive taxation. The banks and major corporations must be turned into public utilities under democratic control, so that their vast resources are used to meet social need, not private profit. This, combined with other redistributive measures, would ensure jobs, housing and decent education and health care for all.

The fight for these policies means a rebellion against Labour and the trade unions and the establishment of rank and file committees in the workplaces and communities, uniting all sections of workers and youth for the struggles ahead. It means mobilising to bring down the coalition government and establishing a workers’ government based on socialist policies.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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