

Rotherham by-election in Britain

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Today's by-election for the parliamentary seat of Rotherham Central in South Yorkshire is being used to shift official politics further to the right.

Rotherham is a former steel and mining town. Its main industries were decimated by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in a seven-year period of intense class struggle between the years 1979 and 1986, which encompasses the year-long miners' strike that began in 1984.

The town's 10.1 percent unemployment rate is higher than the national average of 7 percent. Job Seekers Allowance claimants went up by more than 7.9 percent in the last year. The management of Rotherham General and District Hospital has closed three wards in the last two months, is shedding 750 jobs by 2015 and has been rumoured to be closing its accident and emergency service. In addition, 90-day redundancy notices have been served on the 540 miners at Maltby pit in the neighbouring Rother Valley constituency.

A population of 250,000 is divided into three constituencies. Although Pakistanis and Kashmiris make up just 3 percent of its total population, this figure is substantially higher in this central urban area where it rises to 30 percent, along with ethnic minority Chinese and eastern European groups. Fully 52 percent of Rotherham's black and ethnic minority pupils live in the constituency, and what remains of the steel industry is situated within its boundary.

Former Labour MP Denis MacShane was forced to resign the seat because of the publication of a parliamentary report detailing the abuses he had carried out in his expenses claims. A gang of Asian men have been convicted in a Rotherham Court and imprisoned for grooming local teenage girls for sex. Even before MacShane's resignation, the anti-Islamic state-run English Defence League (EDL), followed by the fascist National Front, held demonstrations in the town, protected each time by the massed ranks of the South

Yorkshire Constabulary.

Taking advantage of all these issues, the capitalist media has created a clamour over corruption and race, making them the dominant political themes of the by-election in order to prevent the real class and political issues facing workers and youth from being addressed.

Eleven candidates are standing, representing Labour, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), the Respect Party of former Labour MP George Galloway, two Independents, an EDL leader standing as an Independent, the nationalist English Democrats and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

The Labour Party bypassed the local party members and imposed its own two candidates on the final selection meeting. Both were white middle class women, with little previous connection with the party. Sarah Champion runs the Bluebell Wood Children's Hospice and had been in the Labour Party two years, while former RAF Wing Commander Sophy Gardner served in Iraq and Afghanistan and is a member of Labour's Friends of the Forces. At the selection meeting, Labour council deputy leader Jahangir Akhtar led a walkout of 120 party members, leaving just 40 to vote. Champion won by 13 to 12. The following day, Akhtar was photographed kissing Champion and declaring it had simply been "a tiff within the family."

The TUSC advances itself as the "anti-cuts" party of a section of the trade union bureaucracy, centred on the Rail Maritime and Transport union, run by former Stalinist Bob Crow, and is staffed by the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party. It holds out the possibility of forcing the Labour Party to reintroduce its abandoned reformist policies. Its candidate Ralph Dyson, a local National Union of Teachers official, claims that racism and fascism can be fought by uniting in popular-front-type organisations with elements in the local Labour bureaucracy. This

serves to conceal the nationalism and warmongering that makes the party a major source of the racist sentiment exploited by the far right. Its pro-big business agenda enables the far right to pose as the defenders of “white workers”.

Respect is trying to replicate the success it had in Bradford West, where Galloway’s attack on British imperialism’s war drive in the Middle East and his condemnation of Labour for abandoning its old reformist programme enabled him to overturn the sitting Labour MP. Galloway is not a socialist but a supporter of various bourgeois nationalist regimes in the Middle East who has built relations with Asian business figures and adapts himself wholesale to an Islamic political agenda in a way that encourages sectionalism and opportunist electoral manoeuvres.

On successive Saturdays, he has carried out open-top bus tours of the constituency with Respect’s candidate Yvonne Ripley, the British journalist captured by the Taliban who converted to Islam on her release.

The deep impact of the Tory-Lib Dem government’s austerity measures and growing class tensions are leading the most class-conscious workers to look for a political solution. Fearful of such a development, the state and sections of the capitalist media are giving particular encouragement to extreme right-wing and fascist forces. Beginning with the massive police escort through town on two Saturday afternoons out of three for the EDL and the National Front, this has been followed by a media furore against Rotherham’s social services department to boost the chances of the right-wing anti-European UKIP.

The UKIP has been able to exploit the identity politics promoted by Labour—based on ethnicity, gender and sexuality—to make political capital and raise its profile.

At the weekend, a couple, both members of the UKIP, gave interviews to the media in which they revealed that the council had removed three children they were fostering from their care, solely because of their membership in the party. The council confirmed that this was the case, arguing that it had acted because of the contradiction between the foster parents’ membership in an anti-immigration party and the children’s eastern European origins.

This was leapt on by right-wing political commentators such as Andrew Neil, who asked the

question on his BBC Sunday Politics Show, “Is Rotherham rotten?” It is being used to give a platform not only for the UKIP but for fascists like the British National Party to air their views and be treated as if they were a respected and accepted part of mainstream British politics. UKIP leader Nigel Farage is now being promoted as a major political figure in British politics, with the Tory anti-European newspaper the *Telegraph* urging a UKIP vote.

Earlier this week, Tory vice chairman Michael Fabricant urged Prime Minister David Cameron to consider a pact with the UKIP in the next general election. Fabricant, Cameron’s election adviser, suggested that by offering to hold a referendum on UK membership in the European Union (EU), the UKIP could be persuaded not to stand against Tory candidates in 2015.

In 2006, Cameron described the UKIP as “fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists”. He has reportedly ruled out such a pact. But the media platform given the UKIP through the Rotherham by-election has seen Farage insist that such a pact would require that Cameron give way to someone even further to the right in the party, such as Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove.



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