

# UK council leaders warn of social unrest

Robert Stevens  
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The leaders of three Labour Party-controlled city councils wrote a letter to the *Observer*, published December 29, warning that the scale of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat austerity agenda could lead to “the break-up of civil society”.

Nick Forbes of Newcastle City Council, Julie Dore of Sheffield City Council and Joe Anderson, the mayor of Liverpool, wrote, “the cuts in local government services have now gone too far... We urge them to stop what they are doing now and listen to our warnings before the forces of social unrest start to smoulder.”

The letter was written in response to the recent 2 percent cut to council budgets, made in addition to the reductions of about 28 percent already cut by central government. As part of the government’s £155 billion austerity programme, more than £1 billion in cuts are due to be imposed by councils over the coming year.

The next round of cuts will further impoverish millions of people and destroy what is left of social provision. The Labourites are fearful of social unrest much broader than the inner-city riots that erupted in August 2011. They are in a position to know. The coalition has only been able to impose its onslaught against working people because they could rely on Labour councils in the major urban conurbations to do their dirty work in alliance with the trade unions.

More than £1 billion in cuts have already been carried out in seven of the eight “core group” of cities outside London—Liverpool, Birmingham, Nottingham, Sheffield, Newcastle, Manchester and Leeds. In addition, 17 of the capital’s inner city boroughs are run by Labour, where hundreds of millions of pounds in cuts have been made.

In Sheffield, 1,400 jobs have gone, with every household in the city suffering cuts equal to £280. £3.5 million will be cut from Sheffield’s 36 children’s centres this year, including 50 job losses. Hundreds of jobs have gone at Newcastle council with another 1,300

jobs set to go this year as part of further cuts of £90 million. More than 1,000 jobs have been lost at Liverpool council since 2011, with many staff subjected to a pay cut.

Labour is not opposing further cuts, but advancing itself as the political vehicle best suited to impose them. The letter is framed in order to bolster Labour’s claim to be the party that truly stands in the tradition of “One Nation Conservatism”. In his repeated efforts to do so, Labour leader Ed Miliband has done what even Tony Blair felt unable to do—explicitly identify Labour as a new Tory party.

The council leaders declare, “The One Nation Tory brand of Conservatism recognised the duty of government to help the country’s most deprived in the belief that economic and social responsibility benefited us all. What we have today is a brand of Conservatism that has no social conscience, taking us back to a Dickensian view of the world. The unfairness of the government’s cuts is in danger of creating a deeply divided nation.”

The message to big business is that Labour can do what the Tories cannot—dress up cuts in the language of “shared sacrifice”, implement workfare as a measure meant to help the unemployed, etc., etc., while suppressing social discontent just as ruthlessly as the Tories when called upon to do so.

Labour’s response to the 2011 riots was to deny that they were in any way connected to rising social inequality and entrenched poverty. Labour councils in cities where large scale rioting occurred (such as London, Manchester, Salford and Birmingham) utilised the disturbances to beef up the apparatus of state repression, leading the way in the arrests of more than 5,000 people nationally and imposing punitive measures on the families of those convicted.

Sheffield’s Julie Dore pledged that the council would work with the police to repress any social unrest. “We

are not complacent, and we still have emergency plan procedures to follow if necessary, although I hope they will not be needed. If they are I am reassured and confident we can respond to any incident,” she said.

The letter by the Newcastle, Sheffield and Liverpool Labour leaders was preceded by one dated December 19 from the leaders of seven Labour councils, including the three above. This letter was also an appeal to the government, but this time stating that Labour was prepared to deepen its collaboration with central government providing the government “meet with us urgently to discuss the very real difficulties for local public services that are now being created by cuts in central government funding.”

It raised the need to “avoid the worst consequences of the emerging financial crisis in our cities,” but stressed, “To be clear from the outset, none of us is under any illusion about the need for spending reductions and the potential for efficiency savings.”

The Laborites wrote, “Each of our councils has made significant cuts in spending in the last two years and been diligent and innovative in finding new ways of working.” The letter boasts of Newcastle, which “has saved £100m in the last three years through a mix of service reductions but where possible innovation and efficiency”; “Liverpool has taken £143m out of its budget since 2011 and the Mayor has worked constructively across parties to identify savings” and that “Sheffield has taken £141m out of its budget over the last two years whilst continuing to work positively with partners across the city.”

This is the real measure of Labour’s crocodile tears for the victims of the cuts. But the party’s naked refusal to propose a single genuine measure to alleviate social hardship means that its ability to politically dupe and demobilise social opposition has been severely curtailed.

Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, the house organ of the Tories, columnist Matthew d’Ancona wrote last week, “During 2013, the spending cuts will truly start to bite. Most of the austerity measures to have taken effect so far have been tax rises or cuts in investment. But that will change in the next 12 months.” He added, “On the ground, I promise you, the cuts will start to seem all too real. They are absolutely necessary. But it is political naivety of the highest order to expect anything other than a furious backlash from and on

behalf of those who lose out—not least the millions whose benefits will be cut in real terms.”

The backlash identified by d’Ancona and by the three council leaders as threatening the break-up of civil society will not only be directed against the Tory/Lib-Dem government, but at their Labour partners in crime.



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