

Thatcher's funeral: Pomp in the service of political reaction

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Adjectives to describe yesterday's funeral of former Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher are not hard to find: nauseating, obscene, provocative.

She was, after all, the most hated political figure in recent British history—an admirer of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and the racist apartheid regime in South Africa, who wrought destruction on working class communities throughout the UK.

Thatcher was given a state funeral in all but name, so that there could be no scrutiny of its total costs, estimated at £10 million—the most expensive ever staged.

The ceremony was so militaristic that some compared the scene in London, with armed police stationed every few hundred yards, to a coup. Her coffin set off from St. Clement Danes, the Central Church of the Royal Air Force and site of the statue to “Bomber” Harris—the architect of the fire-bombing of German cities in the Second World War. Mounted on a horse-drawn gun-carriage, draped in the union flag, it was accompanied by 700 armed forces personnel to St. Paul's Cathedral.

There was more of the political sycophancy demonstrated in the specially recalled parliament last week, with Big Ben silenced for the duration of the funeral and parliament suspended to allow MPs to attend.

The Queen was present for the first time at the funeral of a former prime minister since Winston Churchill's in 1965. Unlike then, however, Thatcher will not lay in state, precisely because she is so widely despised.

It is for this same reason that the mildest criticism of either Thatcher or the expense of her burial arrangements has been greeted with official howls of outrage and even threats of violence and police arrest.

Ruling circles are attempting to beatify the “Blessed Margaret” as a sort of secular patron saint of corruption

and greed. Summed up by Prime Minister David Cameron's declaration, “We are all Thatcherites now,” her political heritage is being proclaimed as the inviolable cornerstone of modern Britain. This includes her aggressive assertion of militarism over the Falklands, but centres on her gutting of the welfare state, union-busting, privatisation and deregulation of the City of London.

Manufacturing this myth demands the suppression of all popular opinion, given that her name is synonymous with policies that have resulted in an economic and social catastrophe for millions. So politically toxic is the Thatcher brand that fewer than a dozen international heads of state were in attendance.

The real social interests served by this propaganda offensive were exemplified by those who did show up. This was a global gathering of the political dregs of neo-conservatism in the United States and Britain, along with other arch-reactionaries.

Present were former US secretaries of state George Shultz and James Baker, former US vice president Dick Cheney and former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger. Newt Gingrich and “Tea Party” leader Michele Bachmann were also in attendance.

Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu was joined by F.W. de Klerk, the last apartheid-era South African president, Australia's John Howard, Canada's Stephen Harper and, from Poland, Lech Walesa and Prime Minister Donald Tusk.

The presence of former Labour prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown completed the rogue's gallery. Both are the political heirs of Thatcher and approved her funeral arrangements.

The aim may have been to demonstrate the unchallenged ascendancy of the right-wing economic nostrums from which those gathered have all benefited.

However, the shrill and intimidatory tone adopted by the media and the bombast and hyperbole accompanying the funeral testify to the weakness, not the strength of the ruling elite.

No amount of official pageantry can conceal the fact that Thatcher is being buried amid the collapse of the entire political project with which she is associated.

In the final analysis, “Thatcherism” represented the desperate and rapacious efforts of the British bourgeoisie to stem its declining global position. But the means through which it sought to do so—imperialist wars, and an assault on the social position of the working class combined with rampant financial speculation, wholly unconnected to any economically productive activity—were themselves the reflection of its ongoing putrefaction.

The near collapse of this entire economic edifice in 2008 has produced only an extension of the same reactionary and bankrupt agenda. The process of self-enrichment of the few has continued, paid for through savage austerity measures for the many.

As Thatcher was laid to rest, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition began the initial rolling out in four London boroughs of a national cap on welfare benefits that will make 80,000 people homeless in the capital alone. Figures released the same day showed that official UK unemployment rose by 70,000 in the last quarter to 2.56 million, while the number of unemployed 16- to 24-year-olds increased by 20,000 to 979,000.

Thatcher’s death alters nothing for working people because her nominal political opponents—the trade unions and the Labour Party—became the most enthusiastic converts to her agenda, so much so that she once joked that Tony Blair and “New Labour” were her greatest legacy.

That there is no change on this score was made clear by the effusive tributes to Thatcher paid by Labour leader Ed Miliband and the party’s agreement to suspend parliament for her funeral.

This state of affairs testifies to the fact that, in the two decades or so since Thatcher’s premiership, the bourgeois economic and political order has become even more rotten and sclerotic.

The extreme disjoint between the official presentation of Thatcher and the hatred and contempt in which she is held by working people is an ideological expression of

a polarisation in class relations that is unsustainable. It points clearly to political storms that lie ahead.



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