

Britain's People's Assembly covers for Labour and trade unions

Paul Mitchell and Robert Stevens
26 June 2013

The “People’s Assembly Against Austerity”, held in London on June 22, was a desperate attempt to uphold the threadbare authority of the trade unions and to suppress any movement independent of them and the Labour Party.

The Assembly was launched with a letter to the *Guardian* in February signed by the Coalition of Resistance (CoR), a collection of Labourites and representatives of the pseudo-left groups. It was headed by the CoR’s president, the octogenarian former Labour member of parliament, Tony Benn, some trade union general secretaries, and a handful of Labour MPs. Alongside these were an assortment of individuals claiming to speak for various protest movements. The signatories included Counterfire (a splinter from the Socialist Workers Party—SWP), the Communist Party of Britain, the Green Party and the Pabloite organisation Socialist Resistance.

In May, Socialist Resistance leader Fred Leplat made clear that the Assembly was conceived in order to conceal the fact that the unions had dropped even the pretence of organising any struggles against the savage austerity measures of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government.

“The initiative for the People’s Assembly came from the Coalition of Resistance after the October 2012 TUC demonstration as there was no further national event planned,” he explained.

In September 2011, at the Trades Union Congress annual conference, its leaders had lined up to promise to fight the government’s attack on pensions. The SWP declared “[S]peech after speech showed that the argument for resisting the Tories has won”, whilst the Socialist Party (SP) claimed that “the floodgates would open.”

The WSWs warned, “The launching of a political and industrial struggle by the TUC is a day that never dawns. Rhetoric aside, the trade unions fully intend to carry on colluding with the government nationally, the employers

and Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour-controlled authorities in imposing whatever cuts are demanded of them.”

Two months later, the one single event organised by the TUC, the November 30 “day of action”, mobilised 2 million workers and youth. Within days, most of the unions went into sectional talks with the government, ensuring that the pension changes were imposed. Within a few months, the four so-called rejectionist unions called off a proposed joint national strike, leaving teachers and lecturers in London to strike alone.

Union executives, some with a large presence of the SWP and SP, vetoed national strike action despite consultation ballots returning sizeable pro-strike votes. The Public and Commercial Services Union, whose general secretary, Mark Serwotka, made the final speech at the People’s Assembly, recorded an unprecedented 71.2 percent vote for strike action.

In September 2012, the TUC annual conference made a hollow threat to consider “coordinated action where possible” over government pay restraint—including “the consideration and practicalities of a general strike” proposed by the SP-dominated Prison Officers Association. The SP declared that the motion’s passage was a “great step forward in the battle,” and the SWP claimed it showed “that the trade union bureaucracy can be pressured to fight.”

The WSWs warned again that the motion “is as worthless as the paper it is written on.”

It was under these conditions that the pseudo-left made their call for the People’s Assembly.

The Assembly was billed as “a national forum for anti-austerity views,” aiming “to develop a strategy for resistance to mobilise millions of people against the Con-Dem government” and playing “a key role in ensuring that this uncaring government faces a movement of opposition broad enough and powerful enough to generate

successful co-ordinated action, including strike action.”

The real task of the Assembly was to corral the various “activists” belonging to the ex-left parties, direct action groups and anti-cuts campaigns behind the union bureaucracy, which is committed to the election of a Labour government pledged to austerity and cuts.

The support the Assembly garnered from eight national trade unions was prominently advertised. Entirely beholden to the union bureaucracy, the event was bestowed with the official seal of approval of the TUC.

Pride of place at the opening session was given to TUC general secretary Frances O’Grady, who declared the Conservatives were carrying out a class war and that the TUC “will retaliate”. She offered “backing” to anyone who votes to strike in future, for which she received rapturous applause.

Pro-Labour journalist Owen Jones proposed a programme of house building, the payment of a living wage and ending tax avoidance, knowing full well that such proposals are anathema to his party.

That same day, Labour leader Ed Miliband, at the party’s national policy forum in Birmingham, declared that a Labour government would not reverse any of the coalition government’s spending cuts and would continue its austerity agenda.

“Nobody here should be under any illusions: the next Labour government will have to plan in 2015 for falling Departmental spending”, said Miliband, adding, “We will show the discipline the challenge of our times demand.”

To cover for the trade unions’ refusal to sanction any fight, Jones was reduced to making a pathetic call to “tap into this country’s proud tradition of civil disobedience.”

After all the bluster, all that emerged on the day were calls for further assemblies in the regions and a recall national assembly in the spring of next year, a day of undefined “civil disobedience” on November 5 and a demonstration, yet to be called, outside the Conservative Party annual conference on September 29.

The assembly declaration concentrates all its fire on the coalition government, making no mention of the Labour Party’s pro-capitalist policies and the trade unions’ betrayals.

During the final plenary, Unite general secretary Len McCluskey, in response to hecklers calling for strike action, declared that he would “not name the day” but would act when his members were, “ready and willing to take that industrial action”.

As is normal with such events, smaller “workshops” were organised on various themes, including one

featuring clips and a discussion of director Ken Loach’s “The Spirit of 45”, a film on the reforms carried out by the post-war Labour government.

This has been taken up by some pseudo-left groups as the basis for urging the formation of a new reformist party of “Left Unity”.

On the platform, however, Loach was forced to make an oblique reference to the fact that any discussion of the launch of a party opposed to Labour had been ruled out of order.

In any case, his claim to offer an alternative to Labour took a hit from his co-speaker Dot Gibson, a former leader of the Workers Revolutionary Party and now general secretary of the National Pensioners Convention.

Gibson declared baldly that the current TUC comprised the most “left leadership” she had seen in her lifetime, citing as proof that it was organising anti-austerity “buses going off around the country”. She warned against any “splitting tactics like in the Winter of Discontent”.

Portrayed as the movement that allowed the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher to come to power in 1979, the Winter of Discontent was a mass movement of workers against a Labour government that was imposing wage freezes and other attacks on behalf of the International Monetary Fund.

Today, under conditions in which Labour, backed by the trade unions, is committed to austerity far surpassing that of the 1970s, Gibson denounces anyone who is not fully committed to the bureaucracy as “splitters”.

The People’s Assembly revealed the right-wing character of the myriad pseudo-left groupings that orbit around the trade union apparatus and secure comfortable berths within it. Only those seeking to reinforce the suffocating grip of the union bureaucracy over the working class could take the TUC’s pronouncements as good coin.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact