

Widespread abstention in UK's Wythenshawe by-election

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The Wythenshawe and Sale East by-election held Thursday was a lacklustre affair marked by widespread abstention and the absence of any popular base for all the competing parties--the coalition government in particular.

The ballot in the working class area of Manchester attracted media attention, mainly for the anticipated result for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

Over the last period, the right wing, anti-European Union party has been able to make sizeable inroads into Conservative Party support--supplanting it in several elections.

UKIP boasted that it would be able to make similar headway in a traditional Labour seat, and establish itself as the second party in the north of England.

As expected, Labour held the seat comfortably, although its overall vote at 13,268 was far below the 18,000 recorded in 2010. UKIP did, however, push the Conservatives into third place--rising from fifth place in 2010 to second in the by-election--a 14 percent increase.

It did so mainly at the expense of the Tories, whose share of the vote fell by 11 percent. It is the sixth time that UKIP has done better than a Conservative candidate since Prime Minister David Cameron took office in 2010. The election of that year saw the Tories take 25.6 percent of the vote in Wythenshawe and Sale, compared to just 14.5 percent this time.

Just as damaging to the Conservatives as their eclipse by UKIP is their further dwindling base of support in northern England, under conditions in which many cities, including Manchester, already have no Tory representatives.

The Tories' coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, fared even worse, losing their deposit in an

election for the eighth time in this parliament. In 2010 the Liberal Democrats secured 22 percent of the vote. This time they couldn't even scrape 4 percent.

Liberal Democrat President Tim Farron said that the by-election had gone "extraordinarily badly", and that the party was paying the price for becoming part of the "establishment" and taking "tough decisions" in government.

The Liberal Democrats' collapse has confirmed that their decision to join the Tories in coalition, and push through the worst austerity measures since the 1930s, has destroyed their electoral base. To the extent that the party can hope to have any presence after the 2015 general election, it is counting on the fact that none of the main parties will be able to secure any popular mandate and will be without a working majority.

With a turnout of just 28.5 percent, there is no disguising the widespread alienation of the overwhelming majority of the population from the existing setup. Voter turnout in elections has decreased in inverse proportion to the growth of social inequality, promoted by the Tories, Labour and Liberal Democrats alike.

The immediate outcome of the election will be a further turn to the right by the political establishment. Cameron responded by pledging that he would listen "very carefully" to UKIP voters. With the European elections to be held in May, Cameron is already under pressure from a section of his party to adopt a more European Union (EU)-sceptic position.

Such demands have nothing to do with opposition to the massive cuts in public spending taking place across the continent, accompanied by a wholesale attack on democratic rights. Whereas many workers are rightly hostile to the EU because it is an instrument of big business, UKIP and its supporters in the Tory Party

complain that the EU is slowing up even greater inroads against workers' rights and conditions, and is thereby damaging the competitiveness of British capital.

While Labour boasted that it had managed to hold its own in Wythenshawe and Sale East, the result is hardly favourable. Even with the coalition hated for its savage austerity programme, which has seen many workers and their families pushed even further into economic insecurity and poverty, Labour failed to rouse any interest.

In fact, out of the total 24,024 votes cast, 10,141 were postal ballots--more than 40 percent. This means that Labour's vote would primarily have come from pensioners.

Labour's entire campaign had been built on its pose that it was the only party prepared to stand up for adequate provision at Wythenshawe Hospital Accident & Emergency department.

Labour leader Ed Miliband had called on the government to intervene, after it became clear that the closure of the A&E department at neighbouring Trafford General Hospital had placed Wythenshawe under additional strain.

Visiting the area as part of the election campaign, Miliband complained, "The change was made in Trafford without obviously making proper provision and I think people are really, really anxious about it."

In fact, hospital workers and the local community had campaigned against the closure of Trafford's A&E unit and the withdrawal of intensive care, acute surgery and children's services. Over 12,000 people signed a petition to oppose the closure plans.

While Labour and trade union leaders had postured in defence of the NHS at these events, in reality local Labour MPs Kate Green and Paul Goggins (whose death triggered the by-election) had endorsed the closure plans providing only that the money be re-invested in the ambulance service and Wythenshawe A&E--a service 10 miles away already known to be oversubscribed.

Just days before the by election, Ed Miliband made a public speech in which he boasted of Labour's leading role in privatising the National Health Service and refused to commit to a future Labour government reversing Tory plans to cut service provision. "Clearly the next Labour government will face massive fiscal

challenges", he said, "including having to cut spending."



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