

UK's People's Assembly stages anti-austerity protest

Paul Mitchell
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Up to 50,000 people took part in a march in London Saturday, organised by the People's Assembly, against the austerity imposed by the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government.

The Assembly was launched with a letter to the *Guardian* in February 2013 signed by the Coalition of Resistance (CoR), a collection of Labourites and representatives of the fake-left groups. It was headed by the CoR's then president, the now deceased former Labour Member of Parliament Tony Benn, the general secretaries of the UK's main trade unions and a handful of other Labour MPs.

The signatories also included Counterfire (a splinter from the Socialist Workers Party/SWP), the Communist Party of Britain, the Green Party and the Pabloite organisation Socialist Resistance.

The demonstration was split into "blocks", one for each of six trade unions and others reserved for an assortment of groups including those protesting against cuts and racism and for environmental issues and peace.

Counterfire leader John Rees addressed demonstrators as they assembled outside BBC headquarters in central London before marching to Parliament Square for a rally. The BBC failed to report the march, as did most media sources.

Rees declared that the march was "the beginning of a rolling campaign to drive this government out of office," with, he claimed, 1.5 million public sector workers taking strike action for better pay on July 10 after three years of freezes.

In reality, at the time of writing only the National Union of Teachers (NUT) has announced plans for action on that day. Most other unions are still in the process of balloting. The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) web site is deliberately and

probably more accurately circumspect than Rees, reporting "1.5 million public sector workers *could* be on strike against a derisory pay offer. The Unite, Unison, GMB, NUT and PCS unions *could* all be walking out together" (emphasis added).

Rees explained that the strike will be followed by a march from Jarrow to London to defend the National Health Service in mid-August and a demonstration outside the NATO summit in Newport, Wales, on August 30. This will culminate in an October 18 national demonstration called by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) under the slogan "Britain Needs a Pay Rise", which, he again claimed, "will be the largest Britain has ever seen".

Rees made no mention of the capitulation of the unions, or to the Labour Party's commitment to austerity. Comedian Mark Steel made a fleeting reference to "the Labour leader [Ed Miliband] sucking up to the rich" and Labour MP Diane Abbott made a plea to Miliband to understand he would not get rid of the Conservatives by "posing with copies of the *Sun*"—a reference to pictures of him holding an England World Cup edition of the right-wing tabloid.

The final rally was addressed by Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn, who dwelt on "the long running campaign to blame the poor", and Green Party MP Caroline Lucas, who repeated calls for a Robin Hood tax and the scrapping of the Trident missile system.

NUT leader Christine Blower told the audience she knew she would get an easy round of applause for announcing teachers would be striking on July 10 and Fire Brigades Union leader Matt Wrack explained that his members were on strike that day against pensions cuts.

Unite Union General Secretary Len McCluskey told the demonstrators that he was sending "a message to

the political elite ... to the leaders of all the political parties that we are not prepared to continue to stand aside whilst everything we hold dear is taken away from us.”

In full demagogic flight, McCluskey warned that the union movement would “make use of all the tools at our disposal including a general strike when that is necessary and *when we have raised the consciousness of workers* ” (emphasis added), before pleading with those attending to “Have faith and we will build a better Britain.”

The pro-Labour journalist Owen Jones, with unintended irony, declared that “the one thing that is missing” was “hope”.

The person afforded the longest time to speak was the comedian Russell Brand, who came under sustained attack last year by the media and politicians for urging people not to vote and calling for a “revolution” in a *New Statesman* article.

Brand continued in the same vein, querying why after 9/11 the bank accounts of those suspected of links to Al Qaeda were frozen but not the accounts of those responsible for the 2008 financial crash. Pointing to the Houses of Parliament, Brand declared, “Power isn’t there, it is here, power is within us.

“The revolution that is required is not a revolution of radical ideas, but the implementation of ideas we already have. Democracy would be nice. The rich and powerful have to yield.”

“This will be a peaceful, effortless, joyous revolution.... There are no answers in fame, fortune and superficial pleasures”, Brand concluded.

Brand’s politics are confused to say the least. His verdict on the political establishment and call for an egalitarian society made him the only one who spoke to the genuine sentiment of many people, above all the younger generation. However, Brand’s allying himself with the People’s Assembly and, through it, to the TUC makes a nonsense of his expressed desire for a revolution, whether it is “peaceful, effortless, joyous” or not.

In June 2013, at the People’s Assembly founding conference, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the creation of the Assembly “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 concocted to conceal the fact that the unions had dropped any pretence of organising any struggles against the government’s austerity measures and given up plans for a further national strike following their capitulation over the government’s attacks on pensions, despite overwhelming votes for strike action.

Following the Assembly’s launch and receiving the official seal of approval from TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady, the trade union bureaucracy virtually abandoned it. Saturday’s demonstration received the briefest “for the record” mentions on union web sites, if at all. It was left to the myriad pseudo-left groupings that have a secure niche in the trade union apparatus to organise a toothless and insincere protest on their behalf.



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