

SEP's David O'Sullivan addresses UK general election meeting on role of unions

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Socialist Equality Party candidate for the London constituency of Holborn and St. Pancras, David O'Sullivan, addressed a hustings meeting called by Unison's Camden branch on Monday.

The meeting was attended by about 70 people.

O'Sullivan focused his remarks on the key role the unions had played in allowing successive governments to implement austerity measures in line with bankers' dictates.

Unison is Britain's second largest trade union, with almost 1.3 million members in public services and their private and voluntary sector contractors. It works closely with the Labour Party, to which it makes a donation of about £2 million a year.

Not a penny of this has benefited Unison's members. Over the last four years, the Labour-controlled Camden Council, located in the constituency just a hundred yards from Unison's head office and where Unison has 3,200 members, has made 450 people compulsorily redundant. The council has carried out £93 million worth of cuts since 2010. It plans to slash a further £73 million over the next three years at a cost of another 600 jobs.

Unison failed to defend its record on refusing to oppose the cuts and decimation of public sector jobs, wages, working conditions and pensions by successive governments. It proposed no action to defend its members in the face of future cuts.

As well as O'Sullivan, on the platform were the Labour Party candidate and former Director of Public Prosecutions Sir Keir Starmer, and representatives from the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Green Party, Animal Welfare Party and the Cannabis is Safer than Alcohol Party candidate. The UK Independence Party did not send either its candidate or a representative.

Unison's call for the meeting set the agenda. For

discussion was the proposal for a new high-speed rail link to the North West of England and the redevelopment of Euston station, the London housing crisis, public spending cuts, the London living wage, and the privatisation of the National Health Service.

All the speakers, bar the SEP candidate, made vague statements that were little more than aspirations, many of which did not even accord with their own party manifestos.

In sharp contrast, O'Sullivan said the SEP was seeking to mobilise working people in a political struggle against austerity and war through the fight for a workers government based on socialist policies. He explained that the 2008 financial crash was just the start of a systemic breakdown of the capitalist profit system, with austerity, social inequality, the assault on democratic rights and the turn to militarism the new normal, not just in Britain, but everywhere.

This meant that the claims by all the other speakers that there was a parliamentary solution to the crisis were just a fantasy. Whatever party or combination of parties forms the next government would make no fundamental difference. Every major decision would continue to be made on behalf of the only constituency that really counts—the corporate and financial elite.

Workers and young people were angry about the lack of housing, high rents, poor wages and cuts to public services. But the big question was “How has this come about?”

“This can't be answered without addressing the role of the unions,” O'Sullivan said. “I tried to compile a list of the disputes betrayed by the unions since the coalition came to power. But I had to stop. There were so many it became an impossible task.

“But one dispute does deserve special mention: the public sector pensions' dispute. This was supposed to

be the flagship policy of the Trades Union Congress—the centre of opposition to the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition.

“Within two years of millions of workers taking part in a one day strike and in huge demonstrations, the dispute became a union-by-union rout with each one, including Unison, signing separate agreements with the government.

“The demobilisation of the pensions’ dispute created the conditions for the loss of hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs without a fight back. At least 20 percent of public sector jobs have been cut and this is expected to double to 40 percent. Accompanying these unprecedented job losses has been a massive increase in workload for remaining staff, continuous pay freezes, which make a mockery of calls for a living wage, and the destruction of vital services.

“Labour councils have been in the forefront of imposing these attacks, with Camden proposing a further £73 million in cuts and 600 job losses.

“The unions have shown they are not up to the task of defending the working class... They are the real reason why the working class was unable to mount an effective challenge to the coalition government.”

O’Sullivan explained that the SEP “fundamentally disagree with the claim of the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition [TUSC] that the unions are the basis for a new workers’ party. The record shows they are just as right-wing and hostile to the working class as Labour.”

O’Sullivan said that he could give chapter and verse on his own union, the RMT, which had founded TUSC, and its sellouts on the Underground where he worked: “We say any effort by working people to defend their jobs and living standards requires a political and organisational rebellion against the unions.”

Many members of the audience, largely made up of trade unionists, were nodding in agreement. There was silence from the Unison bureaucrats. Indeed, at no point in the subsequent questions and contributions did anyone seek to defend the unions, not even the union officials, because they could not.

O’Sullivan said that the SEP would end all austerity measures and pay for a massive programme of public spending by cancelling all the debts to the international financial institutions and turning the banks and major corporations into publicly owned and democratically

controlled utilities. The wealth must be taken from the billionaires and used to pay for essential social services. The European Union must be replaced with the United Socialist States of Europe to create the conditions for Europe to mobilise its vast resources in the interests of society as a whole.

After an initial couple of questions on the proposed high speed rail link that is expected to lead to the demolition of swathes of public and social housing, most of the questions focused on the housing crisis, with angry contributions from the floor.

After the meeting closed, a member of the audience stayed behind to talk to O’Sullivan. He took a copy of the SEP manifesto and said he intended to attend the International May Day online rally on Sunday May 3. *For further details visit www.socialequality.org.uk*



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