

# Tens of thousands protest austerity outside UK Conservative Party conference

Robert Stevens  
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Between 60,000 and 80,000 people protested at Sunday's anti-austerity demonstration outside the ruling Conservative Party's annual conference in Manchester.

The rally in the north of England was organised by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) under the heading "No to Austerity. Yes to Workers Rights."

Workers from throughout Britain attended the rally, with coaches coming from towns and cities as far away as Southampton on the south coast.

Those attending have suffered five years of spending cuts, job losses and attacks on living standards on a scale without precedent since the 1930s. They included teachers, National Health Service employees, factory workers and delegations of retail workers. Several coaches filled with steel workers from Redcar in England's northeast, who face 1,700 job losses, attended.

Also protesting were those hit by billions of pounds of welfare cuts enforced on the poorest and most vulnerable, including the disabled. Students from Manchester's colleges and universities and those from other cities took part, as well as thousands of other young people.

Two of those participating, Sarah and Amy, came to protest from the town of Rhyl in north Wales. Sarah, a journalist, said around 25 people had travelled from Rhyl to demonstrate. She said, "Rhyl is one of the most deprived areas in the UK, you've got cuts happening to youth services hospitals; the maternity ward is closing down. There have been loads of protests and they are still trying to close it down. We want our maternity services back to how they should be."

Amy added, "There is 64 percent unemployment in the west of Rhyl. People are dying as they have had their welfare benefits taken away."

One of their friends, Simone, who was also attending the demonstration, told the WSWs she knew of a case of a 58-year-old former railway worker in Rhyl who had died from the welfare cuts. He had chronic heart disease and suffered from diabetes and was deemed too ill to work. Simone explained, "As he had a very small pension, which

he forgot to declare", they sanctioned his welfare payments during the winter. She added, "He had no heating, no food, no nothing and the next thing he was dead."

In the week leading up to the event, the police and the Labour Party-run Manchester City Council erected a now infamous "ring of steel" outside the entire conference centre area and adjacent Midland Hotel, sealing off a sizable area of the city centre.

Police officers were situated all over the centre from the early hours of Sunday and were in permanent position in front of the ring of steel.

As the march proceeded through the city, protesters noted a number of armed police snipers positioned on prominent buildings overlooking the conference area. Photos began circulating on social media, showing the snipers with high-powered rifles observing the passing demonstration. One sniper was photographed on the Great Northern complex, near the Manchester Central Convention Complex where the Tories' event was held.

A Greater Manchester Police spokesman claimed the snipers were just there to "observe" the "biggest march that has ever been in Manchester because of the Tory Party conference."

He added, "They are high up for that reason, to observe. And they [the guns] are used for their powerful sight, which is stronger than any pair of binoculars. They are not there to shoot people."

The 2010-2015 Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition imposed tens of billions of pounds in spending cuts, and Prime Minister David Cameron's Conservatives, now a majority government, plan to accelerate this onslaught.

Conservative politicians and officials can no longer even walk the streets out of fear of a backlash from the public. Prior to the conference, the organisers issued instructions to its 12,000 delegates that they were not to wear their conference badges and lanyards anywhere outside of the "secure zone."

The slogan of this year's conference emblazoned on front of the sealed off Midland Hotel was "Security, Stability,

Opportunity.”

The TUC and its affiliated unions have not lifted a finger in opposition to mass austerity over the last five years. Instead, they have organised the occasional protest before returning to business as usual and collaborate to impose whatever cuts are demanded by the government.

The Tories’ Trade Union bill, now going through parliament, proposes a higher voting threshold for ballots among its many restrictions on workers’ democratic rights. The imposition of a threshold on ballots is critical for the government to clamp down on the growing anger at its brutal cuts.

Under the legislation, votes for strikes will be declared illegal if fewer than 50 percent of union members participate in a postal ballot and fewer than 40 percent of all workers in “important public services” vote for action. The bill defines these services as health, education of those aged under 17, fire, transport, decommissioning of nuclear installations and management of radioactive waste, and border security.

Before Sunday’s protest, several high-ranking union bureaucrats, including the GMB’s Sir Paul Kenny and Unite’s Len McCluskey were vocal in stating their opposition to the proposed legislation. Both said they would rather go to prison than accede to its dictates.

Despite the hot air and bluster of such statements, repeated by McCluskey at the rally, the contents of a letter he sent to Cameron confirms that the unions are already watering down any opposition.

The letter includes an offer from McCluskey that his union will accept thresholds in ballots for strikes in return for secret, secure workplace voting.

McCluskey fawned before the Tories, writing, “No one, of course, can be happy when strike action takes place—especially in services on which the public depend—on the basis of the active endorsement of only a minority of trade union members affected. In my long experience of industrial relations, mainly in the private sector, such strikes are a rarity.”

He added that if the government would accept his proposal, “Unite, for its part, would be comfortable about accepting the thresholds and the time limit on the validity of ballots proposed in the Trade Union Bill, without prejudice to our position on other elements of the legislation.”

As for McCluskey’s stated opposition to the rest of the bill, this should be treated with contempt. The unions accepted the first raft of anti-trade union laws brought in by the Conservative Thatcher government in the early 1980s. Since then they have used these laws in order to better police the working class. When the Labour Party came to power in 1997, the unions backed this government to the hilt for 13 years, even as it continued to uphold the Tories’ anti-union

laws.

Speaking to the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show* as the conference got underway, Cameron said, “The trade unions are accepting these thresholds are right, that you shouldn’t have damaging strikes that close schools or shut hospitals or stop underground systems working, you shouldn’t have those things without a proper turnout of voters.”

Cameron refused to make even a face-saving concession to McCluskey, stating, “The Speaker of the House of Commons did put together a commission to look at electronic voting and the conclusion of that commission was that it wasn’t safe from fraud.”

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) distributed thousands of copies of a statement at the demonstration titled, “The fight against austerity is the fight for socialism.”

It explained, “Workers face a life and death struggle against a government determined to drive them back to Victorian conditions.”

The SEP warned that in this struggle they are also up against the trade unions who have suppressed the opposition of workers and young people for years. The statement noted, “Strikes are at historically low levels. Last year, only 704,000 working days were lost through strike action. In June, the unions called off no fewer than three planned national strikes—at Network Rail, the Probation Service and Tata Steel.”

The lessons must be drawn of the bitter experience of the working class with Syriza in Greece, it continued. It had come “to power pledged to oppose austerity and betrayed all those who voted for it in a matter of months.”

Greece proved that “it is impossible to defend anything—jobs, wages, essential social services—or to oppose war without breaking the stranglehold of the financial oligarchy over economic and political life. It demands the mobilisation of the entire working class against the ruling class and all its political servants, including the Labour Party and the unions.”



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