

People's Assembly demonstration promotes Corbyn's anti-austerity fraud

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Tens of thousands took part in an anti-austerity demonstration organised by the People's Assembly in London on Saturday.

A broad cross-section of society marched, expressing anger over decades of austerity under Labour and Conservative governments alike. There were large numbers of junior doctors currently involved in industrial action. A delegation of student nurses, who are having their bursaries for training removed, attended. The march was headed by steelworkers and their families threatened by job losses and wage cuts as a result of the sell-off of steel plants by Tata.

However, the organisers and supporters of the People's Assembly--the Stalinists of the Communist Party of Britain, the Trades Union Congress, a few Labour Party "lefts," Green Party and pseudo-left groups, including the Socialist Workers Party and Counterfire--have no perspective to offer those seeking a means to combat austerity.

The Assembly was created by these organisations in 2013 to cover for the Labour Party and the trade unions, which opposed any struggle against the then-Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's attacks on wages and public services.

This time round, the Assembly was oriented directly to the Labour Party. Advertised around the slogan "Cameron Must Go--Tories Out!" and four demands--"Health, Homes, Jobs and Education"--the main aim of the march was to bolster recently elected Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

People's Assembly National Secretary Sam Fairbairn said Corbyn "wouldn't be leader of the opposition if it wasn't for the many marches and rallies against war and austerity that so many have been on." Fairbairn declared, "The right wing want to get rid of Jeremy and the politics he represents. Tens of thousands taking to the streets again can keep progressive politics on the offensive."

In fact, the right wing is the majority of Labour MPs and councillors, few of whom turned up for the demonstration. Out of thousands of Labour councillors, less than 90 (only two in London) signed a letter of support for the march, despite the fact that councils have had £12.5 billion cut from

their budgets (around 40 percent) and 700,000 council workers have lost their jobs since 2010.

The march ended in Trafalgar Square, where the main speakers were Labour Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, Green Party leader Natalie Bennett and Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey.

The platform delivered a party political broadcast in support of Labour. Bennett made no mention of her own party or called for people to vote for it, instead calling for "a change in government" to "get rid of the Tories." This was despite the Greens publishing the day before their manifesto for the May local elections, in which they are standing over 1,500 candidates.

McCluskey followed Bennett. Back at the People's Assembly first demonstration in 2014, the Unite leader promised those attending that the union movement would "make use of all the tools at our disposal including a general strike when that is necessary..."

No strike ever came and there was no such demagoguery this time. McCluskey had nothing to offer other than worthless messages of "solidarity" to steelworkers who were fighting "for the whole of the manufacturing sector of our nation" and junior doctors and teachers "all of whom are fighting for our future."

McCluskey blamed the government for "phone hacking, expenses scandals, police cover-ups, the banking crisis, illegal wars and now the Panama papers," donning a panama hat as he spoke. He omitted to say that the previous Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were implicated in all this as much as the Tories.

He declared that "under Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell, we now have a leadership fighting for ordinary people in Parliament, in workplaces and on the streets, here, in London."

This set the stage for McDonnell, who said, "For too long, Labour leaders in the past have seemed to be embarrassed by association with struggles on the street or industrial action. That era is over. Whether it's in Parliament or on the picket line, this leadership will be with you."

But all he offered were feeble promises littered with caveats. For the steelworkers, he said meekly, “Yes, if we have to nationalise in the short term, we will nationalise.” On nuclear weapons: “We are committed to scrapping Trident if we can win the argument in the party.” To teachers: “When they come to academise [privatise] our schools, if teachers wish to take industrial action, we will be with them in solidarity.”

McDonnell claimed austerity was “not an economic necessity,” driven by the crisis of capitalism, “but a political choice.” Labour “will end austerity,” build hundreds of thousands of council homes, restore benefits, make the rich and corporations “pay their way,” and create “a world of peace,” he said. McDonnell told the audience that “we don’t have to wait until elections in 2020. We have to work to bring down this government at the first opportunity.”

In a video posted on his Facebook page, Corbyn said he was not able to attend the protest, as he was campaigning in Liverpool for next month’s local elections. The video was posted with an accompanying message from Corbyn saying, “The Labour Party is now an anti-austerity Party and we’re standing up against the failed policies of the Tory government.”

The claim of the People’s Assembly and Corbyn that Labour are now opposed to austerity is a fraud. In the run-up to last month’s budget, McDonnell said a Labour government “will be absolutely ruthless about how we manage our spending.” A “Fiscal Credibility Rule” would underpin Labour’s policies and “we would commit to always eliminating the deficit on current spending in five years, as part of a strategy to target balance on current spending over a target five-year period.”

In December, Corbyn and McDonnell issued a letter instructing Labour councils, which control spending in every major city and town, to abide by the law and impose austerity measures demanded by the Conservatives.

In contrast to McDonnell’s rhetoric, the truth is that Labour has had ample opportunity to bring down the government, but has ensured that Cameron remain in power. Last year, Corbyn gave a free vote to Labour MPs on preparations for Britain to join the bombing of Syria, ensuring that the Conservative government would win the day. More recently, when the Panama Papers scandal detailing mass tax avoidance by the super-rich enveloped Cameron and the Tories, Corbyn and McDonnell refused to call on Cameron to resign or even to call a vote of no confidence in him.

Last week, Corbyn again came to the rescue of the Tory government, which is deeply divided over the June 23 referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union. With Cameron’s association with the Remain

campaign a poisoned chalice for those sections of the British bourgeoisie favouring continued membership, Corbyn gave his first speech in support of the EU. Media and political commentators openly discuss that Corbyn is their only hope of mobilising voters--especially young people--in support of Remain, despite the fact that many are hostile to the pro-big business message and anti-migrant rhetoric of the official Remain and Leave camps.

The People’s Assembly had campaigned for a Labour government under then-leader Ed Miliband in the May 2015 general election. After Labour’s defeat, the People’s Assembly was able to organise a demonstration the following month of some 250,000 people.

At that rally, Green Party MP Caroline Lucas summed up the People’s Assembly role as an external lobby for a so-called “Progressive Alliance” of the Greens and Labour in England, Plaid Cymru (The Party of Wales) and the Scottish National Party. A prominent place on the platform was given to Corbyn, who at the time was one of four contenders in the Labour leadership contest.

Due to the role of the unions in emasculating every struggle of the working class in the intervening period, and the efforts of Corbyn and McDonnell in ensuring that the Tories remain in office, this year’s march was significantly smaller.

The organisers are well aware of seething class anger. In the run-up to Saturday’s protest, Fairbairn had warned, “We’re now seeing the potential for big unrest across the country and it won’t be long until this government face a movement for change they can’t control.”

The demonstration underscored that the role of the pseudo-left is to divert this growing opposition into the suffocating embrace of the Labour Party.



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