

UK trade unions fail to mobilise for anti-austerity demonstration

Paul Mitchell
19 July 2016

The “No to Austerity, No to Racism, Tories Out” demonstrations in London and Glasgow last Saturday, organised by the People’s Assembly and Stand Up to Racism, were billed as the beginning of a mass mobilisation against the Conservative government and its newly installed leader, Theresa May.

The stated aim was to show “a positive and united response to the political earthquake on 23 June”—the date of the Brexit referendum on membership of the European Union (EU).

Advertisements for the demo had declared, “The Tories have been plunged into crisis by the result of the EU referendum. [Former Prime Minister] David Cameron will soon be gone. The Tories will use Brexit to whip up anti-immigrant racism and accelerate their austerity policies and attacks on living standards.

“But it doesn’t have to be this way. The Tories are weaker and more divided than they have ever been. It looks likely that an early General Election will have to be called when Cameron steps down. However people voted in the referendum, we now need to unite and take to the streets to demand an end to austerity policies, to stand up to anti-immigrant racism and show our solidarity with refugees and migrants.”

In the event, somewhere between 5,000 and 10,000 people took part in London, and a few hundred in Glasgow. Most of the banners were from the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which has consistently functioned as propagandist-in-chief for the People’s Assembly, with others from the Green Party, SWP splinter Counterfire, Stop the War Coalition, Stand Up To Racism, the People’s Assembly, JC4PM (the pro-Jeremy Corbyn Labour Party Momentum group), Black Lives Matter, groups protesting deportations, and various community groups.

In Parliament Square, speakers from these organisations made anodyne and uninspiring speeches, which raised

little applause from a rapidly diminishing audience. None of them had any perspective to offer those present seeking a means to combat austerity. It was all about forgetting differences that arose during the referendum campaign (the SWP, Socialist Party and Communist Party were for Leave, the Labour Party and Greens were for Remain) and regrouping over the issue of racism.

Typical was that of Caroline Russell, a Green Party councillor in Islington (where Corbyn is MP) who pleaded, “Progressive politicians of all parties have to put aside our divisions ... our tribal politics, and stand together.”

Weyman Bennett, an SWP leader and joint convenor of Stand up to Racism, and Lindsey German, former SWP leading figure and now leader of Counterfire, came together to condemn Theresa May’s anti-immigrant policies and to insist her government was weak and divided. The National Union of Students vice president, Shakira Martin, continued on the same theme, adding, “I’m sickened at a Tory government prepared to use racism as a tool to divide us. I’m a proud supporter of Jeremy Corbyn.”

Corbyn sent a message to the march saying, “A year ago the massive anti-austerity march showed a different kind of politics. Austerity is a political choice, not a necessity.

“I look forward to seeing you all at the campaign events this summer. Together we can win.”

One would scarcely have thought that Corbyn is presently fighting to maintain his position as party leader against an attempted coup by the party’s Blairite right wing that has been backed by the vast majority of Labour MPs. Corbyn himself was at the annual Tolpuddle Martyrs festival in Dorset, where he implored the Labour Party to unite, “so we can change things” and “empower people together to challenge the orthodoxy.” In his half-hour speech, he too made no reference to the coup being

mounted against him.

The most striking feature of the London demo was the absence of the trade union leaders and Labour “lefts” who had been fundamental to the creation of the People’s Assembly, which was its sponsor. They were signatories to the Assembly’s launch in a letter to the *Guardian* in 2013, penned by the defunct Coalition of Resistance headed by now deceased former Labour MP Tony Benn, a collection of Labourites including Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, the general secretaries of the main trade unions, and various pseudo-left groups.

At its founding conference, TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady declared the Conservatives were engaged in class war and that the TUC would “retaliate.” Unite union General Secretary Len McCluskey proclaimed that the unions would “make use of all the tools at our disposal including a general strike when that is necessary.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned that its creation “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 unions had dropped any pretence of opposing the government’s austerity measures, and abandoned further strike action following their capitulation to the government’s attacks on pensions in 2011, despite overwhelming votes for strike action. It was left to the myriad pseudo-left groupings that have secured a niche in the trade union apparatus to keep the People’s Assembly going and provide a platform to the union leaders, as well as Corbyn and McDonnell.

In June 2015, the People’s Assembly was able to organise a demonstration of some 250,000 people in London. Demonstrations also took place in Glasgow, Liverpool, Bristol and other cities. In April this year, tens of thousands took part in another demonstration, the main aim of which was to bolster the anti-austerity credentials of Corbyn.

These demonstrations were an expression of the seething anger within the British working class and among youth, but the role of the pseudo-left was to divert this growing opposition into the suffocating embrace of the trade unions and the Labour Party. This, and Corbyn’s refusal to fight the attacks of the right, found expression in this year’s low turnout.

One of those who attended Saturday’s demonstration was Faisal, a junior doctor. Junior doctors have just voted down a sell-out contract agreed between their trade union, the British Medical Association, (BMA) and the

government.

Faisal said he expected many more people at the demonstration, and asked, “What has happened? The other month we had a huge demo and lots of big name speakers. This time nothing. We have been deserted ... the junior doctors and everyone else in the NHS. The BMA is useless and the other unions talk a lot but do nothing.

“I would like to support someone like Jeremy Corbyn but he sounds so pathetic. He has given in on so many things already, like on Europe and the bombing of Syria, and that is before he has even become Prime Minister. I don’t think he will stand up to the Labour MPs for long. The Labour Party could split.

“I guess that would be a good thing and allow for something new. The trouble is I cannot see anyone who really offers an alternative. Some of the speakers here talk about progressive and anti-racist people coming together but that includes the Liberals, Green Party and all sorts of Labour types. They are the ones who have got us in this mess. It’s their ideas which have put so many people off and made them vote Leave in the referendum. A lot of people said vote Leave and that would get rid of Cameron. They seemed to make that the main point. Instead, the Conservatives have ridden out the storm and it is Labour that are in big trouble.”

Faisal explained that he did not vote in the referendum, saying, “I didn’t agree with either side.” He said he thought the Socialist Equality Party had been “correct to call for an active boycott” of both Remain and Leave camps in the referendum, adding, “And you seem to be talking about real socialist policies which no one here even dared mention. The whole anti-austerity thing has collapsed.” Faisal said, “I agree with you” in criticising “parties like the SWP who have encouraged all us angry people to put our faith in the Labour Party and trade union leaders when what is really needed is something completely new and independent from them.”



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