

# The Torch Light protest in Manchester: A cynical cover by Labour for complicity in austerity cuts

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A march and rally organised last Saturday by the Manchester City Council and trade unions attracted fewer than 400 people. The entire event was an object lesson in cynicism and dishonesty, with those attending witnessing the obscene spectacle of the council protesting its own cuts!

The evening event had previously been hyped as a “Torch Light March” against the government’s continued cuts to social care and schools. All of those who spoke constantly referred to “Tory” government cuts, as if they had nothing to do with the cuts being imposed on Manchester’s population. No one addressed the fact that the austerity offensive, which has devastated the lives of millions of working class people in towns and cities nationwide, was initiated by the 2007-2010 Brown Labour government.

No call was made for a fight against the cuts. Instead, the event focussed on a reactionary regionalist appeal to the government not to demand such harsh cuts of Manchester council. On its Facebook page, the event called on those attending to “Stand up for your city”. One would never have known that billions of pounds in cuts were being enforced in every urbanised centre in the UK.

At the march, the organisers launched the “Manchester Petition”. The petition called on “[Prime Minister] Theresa May and her Government to fully fund Social Care and Schools in Manchester.” Petitions are to be handed out across the city by the council and their union backers, before being taken to Downing Street on March 7, the day before next week’s budget is published.

In the run-up to the march, which had been widely promoted, one of the organisers, Labour councillor Pat Karney, declared, “The scandalous cuts will damage the lives of our older residents and young people. A recent health report indicated that 30,000 vulnerable people have

died because of the cuts. We have a moral duty to protect our older and younger citizens”.

This utter fraud should be rejected with contempt.

In Manchester, the council has enforced £340 million of cuts since 2010 resulting in the workforce being slashed by nearly 40 percent, from almost 10,500 posts to 6,500, with enormous cuts made to services.

New cuts are now being finalised, with Manchester City Council facing a budget deficit of between £40 million and £75 million by the end of 2019-2020. Around £12 million is to be slashed from the adult social care budget. Under the latest cuts, an additional 160 jobs are under threat.

Ahead of the new cuts, council chief Sir Richard Leese described the “Efficiency Plan” submitted to the government last October, as an “ambitious budget, which, will nevertheless involve some difficult decisions”. He added, “We have to do services fundamentally differently to the way we do [them] now”.

Since 2010, across Greater Manchester as a whole—with a population of more than 2.5 million—there have been cuts of almost £2 billion. Nine of out the 10 councils in the Greater Manchester area—with Trafford the only exception—are Labour-run.

These cuts have been imposed with the enthusiastic collaboration of Labour’s partners in the trade unions who have not lifted a finger to defend a single job or vitally needed services.

The main Labourites at the rally were Leese, Lucy Powell, the Labour MP for Manchester Central, and the Labour candidate for Manchester mayor, Andy Burnham. National Union of Teachers General Secretary Kevin Courtney was among those speaking from the unions.

A right-wing Labourite, Leese was knighted in 2007 after he and the Manchester City Council pioneered the

most intimate relations with the private sector and big business over the previous two decades.

Despite his record, Leese was farcically introduced to the audience as “leading the charge against Tory austerity”. As the leader of a council whose cuts are approaching half a billion pounds, he said with a straight face, “councils can make a difference”, as “this council has made a difference”.

Leese’s contempt for some of the most vulnerable people in the city—who have been devastated by Labour’s cuts—was exemplified by his comments in 2015 about the city’s homeless whose numbers have skyrocketed over the last decade.

Writing in his blog, Leese claimed that 80 percent of people begging in the city were not homeless and went as far as saying the conditions in the city were “so generous that we’ve had at least one example of somebody commuting from London to beg on our streets”. No slander against the homeless was big enough, with Leese continuing, “I suspect that most people who give to beggars think the money is going to pay for food and shelter when the most likely beneficiaries are the nearest...drug dealer”.

The same year, following protests across the centre of Manchester by homeless people—who had erected “tent cities” to highlight the plight of the homeless—the council responded by using the courts and bailiffs to forcefully evict them from the city centre.

At the same time as Manchester council is gutting services, it is proposing a council tax increase of 4.99 percent for 2017-2018, further impoverishing the population. This will include an extra 3 percent over the next two years, meaning that tax payers will be forced to pay for the increased demands of social care.

The Local Government Association representing councils nationwide said authorities would have to continue cutbacks to essential services to plug growing shortfalls in adult social care. These services include road repair, children’s centres, leisure centres, parks and libraries.

A tiny proportion of Manchester’s population have escaped the impact of mass austerity. The news of fresh cuts to services and a sharp rise in council tax was followed by news that senior executives at Manchester City Council are to share almost half a million pounds in pay rises.

Late last year, pay rises were approved for senior executives within the council, with incoming Chief Executive Joanne Roney to receive nearly £200,000 a

year. The council stated, “The results of a review of senior officer salaries at Manchester City Council, which will save almost £250,000 over three years, will be reported to its Personnel Committee on Monday 12 December”.

What the council did not mention—and hidden away in the report handed to the Personnel Committee—is that the total gross additional cost of council executive pay increases over the next three years will total £456,712. The Personnel Committee is entirely made up of executive council members.

A 2016 report into family poverty across Greater Manchester, carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Manchester University, showed that one in five are on the breadline. This included 620,000 people, including 180,000 children, living in deprivation. In Manchester, 40 percent were found to be living in impoverished neighbourhoods.

The growth of poverty and deprivation can be seen across Manchester; while at the same time, there are enormous amounts of private sector building development within the city centre. While cuts have ripped apart essential services, Manchester City council has handed millions of pounds to facilitate the Co-Op Group’s £800 million NOMA redevelopment project in Manchester.

The fact that just a few hundred people attended the Torch Light March, despite its being announced weeks in advance, reveals the alienation of the population towards all the parties of big business and their union backers.

The austerity offensive being led by Labour councils has continued seamlessly with the election of Labour’s nominally “left” leader, Jeremy Corbyn. Just months after his election in September 2015, Corbyn and his closest political ally, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, sent a letter to all Labour councils demanding they abide by the law and impose austerity cuts demanded by the Conservative government. As the record of Manchester City Council demonstrates, all Labour councils have faithfully carried out the instruction to the letter.



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