Outpouring of anger over Grenfell Tower fire at London anti-austerity rally

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Tens of thousands marched in an anti-Conservative government "Not One Day More" demonstration in London on Saturday.

The march began at the headquarters of the BBC's Broadcasting House in Portland Place and proceeded to Parliament Square. There it was addressed by speakers including Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, Trades Union Congress (TUC) General Secretary Frances O'Grady and Unite union General Secretary Len McCluskey.

The rally was organised by the People's Assembly, a pro-Labour umbrella. Its aim was to promote the formation of a Labour government as an answer to Tory austerity measures.

At the beginning of June, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell called for a million people to "get out on the streets" for the protest. It was necessary to build pressure on Prime Minister Theresa May to call another election "as early as possible. What we need now is the TUC mobilised, every union mobilised, get out on the streets. Just think if the TUC put out that call—that we want a million on the streets of London in two weeks' time," he said.

The rally could have been much bigger than it was—the highest estimate by the People's Assembly itself was 100,000. This was the first major national demonstration since the Tories suffered a humiliating electoral collapse in the snap June 8 general election. While remaining in office in an unstable alliance with the Democratic Unionist Party, the Tories lost their majority due to a surge in support for Labour, which was based on Corbyn's claim that Labour was an anti-austerity party. After Labour's defeat in the 2015 general election, the People's Assembly rally that year attracted 250,000 people.

But contrary to McDonnell, the unions and the Labour Party itself did very little to mobilise for the demonstration. The TUC did not even bother publicising the demonstration on its web site. Their overriding aim is to ensure that, should the Tories fall, this will not be as a result of a mass movement of the working class that Labour cannot direct into parliamentary channels.

Even so, while the organisers tried to promote a carnival atmosphere, backed up by adulatory chants of "Oh Jeremy Corbyn," the mood of many was angry and the June 14 Grenfell Tower inferno was the main motivation for people to attend.

Many placards focused on calls of "Justice for Grenfell," and when the march reached Parliament Square, a minute's silence was held "in memory and respect" to its victims.

Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell pledged to its victims, "We will stand with you and your families all the way through. We bring you sympathy but more importantly we bring you solidarity." But his only practical proposal was that Labour would ensure "every one of those families is properly housed within the community in which they want to live."

Lindsey German of Counterfire, as convenor of the Stop the War Coalition, declared that three weeks after the general election, "We're here today to say to Theresa May we're putting you on notice."

"We need a system change," she said, before stressing, "We need an election. But we can't wait until then. We need more demos and peoples' assemblies."

Under conditions in which the unions have systematically sabotaged every single struggle over the last decade against austerity, German insisted that workers continue to back these rotten organisations, urging "every public sector worker through their union

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to say let's put pressure for strikes."

TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady said, "I'm proud to represent millions of workers. Who knows what will happen next. Working people are hungry for change." Using the Tory government as an excuse for a refusal to fight, she added pathetically, "We want our unions to be free to stand up for us to scrap the pay cap."

Green Party councillor in the London Assembly Sian Berry said speakers were not all in the same party but share the "same values," adding "austerity is doomed." She said she "hoped and trusted" that Corbyn would provide "solid words about the conduct of Labour councils and get them better behaved" regarding the austerity cuts they have carried out and "sort them out."

Corbyn will do no such thing. In reality, just weeks after winning the Labour leadership contest in September 2015, Corbyn and McDonnell issued a letter instructing Labour councils, which control public spending in every major city and town, to abide by the law and impose austerity measures demanded by the Conservatives.

Corbyn himself spoke for 10 minutes, declaring, "We are increasing in support and we are determined to force another election as soon as we can."

Labour's campaign had been written off by the "commentariat, broadsheets and most, but not all, of tabloids" and the election portrayed as "a walk in the park for the Tories," he said. Hailing this as Labour's rebirth, he made no mention of the moves of the Labour right against him over the last two years, with the Blairites actively working to lose the election heavily in order to hasten his removal.

Regarding the Grenfell Tower fire, Corbyn stated, "Somewhere along the line there was a whole system that led them to living in a fire trap."

He praised the emergency services, but amid growing public anger at the horrific loss of life did not withdraw his support for May's bogus public inquiry—which would be the surest way of hastening her removal from power.

Many Grenfell residents have said they will not cooperate with the inquiry after its head, retired former Court of Appeal judge Sir Martin Moore-Bick, told the media he believed the probe and its recommendations would be "pretty well limited" to what had caused the fire and its rapid spread and would not carry out any broader investigation.

Two days before the demonstration, this prompted Corbyn to politely advise May in a letter that the inquiry should be split into two parts! This would supposedly ensure that "timeliness would not have to be sacrificed for rigour." Understanding how the fire started was of the "utmost importance," he wrote, but "it is also clear that the Grenfell fire has much wider implications for national policy issues."

Saturday saw Corbyn issue a similar mixture of political soporifics and militant rhetoric. Rather than a call to political and social struggle or indeed any practical measure to be taken against the government, he spoke only of Grenfell teaching "us all a message" of the need for decent social housing, an end to health inequality and to austerity. The Tories and austerity were "in retreat," he concluded. "This is the age of imagination. This is the age in which we will achieve that decency and social justice that we all crave."

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