

Britain's pseudo-left promote Labour councils enforcing savage cuts

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The Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Counterfire, the Socialist Party (SP) and the Peoples' Assembly have joined forces to promote a September 12 "anti-austerity" delegation to parliament, called by Bristol Mayor Marvin Rees.

Rees heads the city's Labour-controlled council, which voted in February to slash £104 million from public spending by 2022, including £33 million over the next financial year. A "hit list" targets 112 services, including meals-on-wheels, school "lollipop" patrols and dementia support. Half of the city's libraries face closure and all of its public toilets.

During February's council meeting, protesters were ejected from the public gallery after they heckled Rees. He has since presided over a "community consultation," asking residents to decide where the cuts should fall. On July 10, Rees told a consultation at Bristol City Hall that the council's budget would mean "internal sacrifice." Outside, protestors held placards that read, "Marvin, you cut we bleed" and "Bristol City Council cuts will kill."

According to the SWP, Rees is now spearheading a major struggle by Labour councils against austerity. In a July 31 article, "Taking up the fight against the local authority cuts," Sadie Robinson wrote, "Pressure is growing on Labour councils to fight cuts. All have imposed attacks on workers and services then blamed Tory cuts, sparking angry protests and some strikes. Now Bristol's Labour mayor has unveiled a plan to lead a delegation to Whitehall and demand an end to council funding cuts. And he wants other councils to join him."

Robinson continues, "Marvin Rees has written an open letter to council leaders in Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield. Together with Bristol these ten make up the 'core cities'—and nine are run by Labour councils. Rees called on them to 'harness' the mood against austerity and lobby a 'weakened' government on 12 September."

Rees' open letter was a transparent act of political damage control. It was aimed at deflecting public outrage against Labour's slash-and-burn measures by shifting the blame once more onto the Tories. In reality, Theresa May's government, like the Cameron government before it, has relied on local Labour councils to enforce its cuts on the ground.

The September 12 "lobby" called by Rees commits Labour councils to precisely nothing. It is timed to coincide with their presentation of a green paper to the party's leader, Jeremy Corbyn, outside parliament.

Titled "Invest, Reform, Trust," the paper is described by Rees and his fellow council leaders as advancing "alternatives to austerity." It does nothing of the sort. It was released on July 18 at an industry roundtable in Manchester, co-sponsored by accounting giant PwC and

"featuring business leaders and industry bodies from across the UK."

Its pro-business proposals include private finance initiatives, localised business tax rates, and increased devolution, ushering in a "place-based industrial strategy" to boost competitiveness and "let cities and their people 'get on with the job' of raising productivity." Case studies cited in the paper include Sheffield's Skills Made Easy, described as "a truly employer-led training scheme," which pays apprentices just £3.50 an hour.

Another proposal, the Labour councillors explain, "is to broaden the programme of Enterprise Zones to cover specific industrial sectors" that "would seek to create tax and other incentives to build clusters and strengthen agglomeration effects in cities." In other words, devolved councils would preside over a bidding war to attract investment based on tax handouts and the most brutal levels of exploitation.

The SWP's support for the green paper and their willingness to corral protests behind such a ruthless pro-market agenda is not accidental. Members of the SWP and other pseudo-left groups are employed throughout the public sector, as union officials and local reps, and as middle managers and executives in local authorities and NGOs. With Corbyn being groomed for office, the pseudo-left is positioning itself as a key power broker—offering its services to enforce Labour's agenda against the working class.

If anyone thinks this is an exaggeration, consider the following quotations taken from the SWP, Counterfire and the Socialist Party.

The same edition of Socialist Worker cited above quotes People's Assembly member Huw Williams, who openly solidarises himself with Rees: "There is anger towards the mayor, but there's also a sense that he's 'one of us'. If Rees leads protests, that has the potential to mobilise a large number of Labour Party people."

"Now the mayor has said he will challenge the cuts, people see this as a march not against him but the Tories. There's a good chance it will be on a serious scale."

This open defence of the Labour Party at the very point when Rees and dozens of Labour-run councils are implementing austerity is made more explicit still by Counterfire, an SWP splinter group led by Stop the War Coalition leader Lindsey German. A July 20 article titled "Mayor of Bristol to lead protest against austerity" describes his call for a protest as "very welcome news," providing "a significant opportunity for the anti-austerity movement."

The nature of this "opportunity" is made clear in the course of their extraordinary article.

"At a recent march in solidarity with Grenfell organised by Bristol People's Assembly and the tenants' union ACORN, there were calls for Labour councillors to take a much more active stance in opposition

to the cuts. Clearly, there is considerable disquiet over this issue amongst the thousands of Labour party members in Bristol, who can see that these cuts risk undermining Labour's recent increased support.

"In these circumstances, Bristol People's Assembly decided that we would lobby the council to urge them to call both a mass lobby of Westminster and a Bristol-based protest rally against the cuts. An open letter which we sent to the Mayor and Labour councillors outlining our position was published in the Bristol Post."

The problem with the cuts, according to Counterfire, is not that they will devastate the working class. The fear that preoccupies this social layer, especially after the Grenfell Tower fire that crystallised such deep popular anger, is that the cuts will undermine and threaten the Labour Party's grip over the working class. Hence, the friendly advice they offered Rees and his fellow Labour councillors: organise a public protest against the Tories.

The purpose of this protest is not to oppose the cuts, as Counterfire freely admits: "Following discussion, we chose not to foreground the demand for the council to not implement any cuts, (although we assured them of widespread support were they to take this course of action). Instead, we focused on the call for a mass lobby and a public demonstration.

"This was largely out of recognition that people want to mainly protest at the Tories who they rightly consider the main enemy, rather than at a Labour mayor and council who they, again rightly believe, should be on their side."

The granting of a political amnesty to Bristol's mayor exposes political relations of central importance for the British ruling class: the daily collaboration by the pseudo-left with the Labour Party. A post on the People's Assembly Facebook page boasts of this relationship: "A coalition of 14 organisations [including the Greens, Bristol Labour, ACORN, the GMB and Unite] led by Bristol PA [People's Assembly] has been meeting with the Mayor and his team in the last week to plan arrangements."

While Rees and his fellow councillors have faced public anger over their enforcement of austerity, the People's Assembly, SWP, Counterfire, et al. have moved in like a team of consultants. They function as Labour's political protection racket, with all protests being channelled into a planned ToriesOut national protest and week of action outside the Conservative Party conference in Manchester in October.

The People's Assembly has continued to work with Rees despite his explicit statement—in a letter to them on July 12—that he would not retreat from enforcing an austerity budget: "I have been explicitly clear that I do not agree with refusing or failing to set a budget... It is important to remember what Jeremy Corbyn wrote about legal budgets."

Rees quotes from Corbyn's December 2015 directive to Labour council leaders that was co-signed by Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell and Shadow Secretary of State for Local Communities John Trickett, instructing them to impose cuts:

"If this does not happen, i.e., if a council fails to set a legal budget, then the council's section 151 officer is required to issue the council with a notice under section 114 of the Local Government Act 1998. Councillors are then required to take all actions necessary to bring the budget back into balance. It would mean either council officers or, worse still, Tory ministers deciding council spending priorities. Their priorities would certainly not meet the needs of the communities which elected us."

One week later, the People's Assembly replied to Rees, welcoming his July 12 letter and congratulating him for his "bold political stance" and "initiative in opposing austerity"!

The actions of Labour councils throughout the country, which have helped implement more than £100 billion in spending cuts since 2008, point to the duplicity of the ToriesOut campaign. If Labour comes to power under Corbyn, it will continue and deepen the Tories' measures.

None of this will restrain the Socialist Party, which continues to serve up absurd vistas of a socialist paradise under the new Labour leader. The August 9 edition of *The Socialist* hailed a report produced by the SP's Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), "How much reserves have councils got?"

TUSC's report tabulates the resources and borrowing facilities controlled by 124 Labour-led councils. The SP's writer enthusiastically explains, "It argues that 'the substantial resources of the local state under the control of the Labour Party' could be used to fight austerity now, 'without waiting for a change of government'... It shows what a counter-power to Theresa May's 'weak and wobbly' government they could be—if they were prepared to turn Jeremy Corbyn's anti-austerity message into action."

The article continues: "Jeremy Corbyn should instruct the councillors to withdraw their attacks on the workers now or face not being able to stand as Labour candidates in next year's elections," before concluding with a quote from TUSC national chairperson and SP leader Dave Nellist, who declares: "There is a chance to show in the months ahead what Jeremy Corbyn's anti-austerity policies could mean in practice if Labour councillors refused to vote for cuts in the council chambers."

Refusing any struggle against rightwing MPs and councillors, Corbyn's "anti-austerity message" is a fiction. While publicly condemning homelessness and decrying the resort to food banks, he has held the line in his insistence that all Labour councils adhere to the Tories' budget lock. He does all of this safe in the knowledge that his pseudo-left backers in the unions and throughout the public sector will continue to promote his "anti-austerity" bona fides.

A genuine struggle against austerity must unite every section of the working class in direct opposition to Labour's pro-capitalist programme. This means repudiating the Tories' austerity budgets and fighting for a socialist programme, aimed at confiscating the wealth of the financial oligarchy and placing society's resources under the democratic control of the working class.



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