

People's Assembly stage tame protest outside Conservative Party conference

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Thousands protested in Manchester city centre on Sunday against the Conservative (Tory) government, which was holding its annual conference in the city.

Delegations included workers in the National Health Service, education, rail and the Royal Mail. Representatives of various anti-austerity campaigns attended along with delegations of young people opposing cuts in education. A delegation also attended from the Justice for Grenfell campaign.

So despised are the government that they are forced to assemble under a security lockdown. In the week leading up to the event, Greater Manchester Police (GMP) and the Labour Party-run Manchester City Council erected the now infamous “ring of steel” outside the entire conference centre area and adjacent Midland Hotel, sealing off a sizeable area of the city centre around Manchester Town Hall. There was a large police presence in the city centre, with GMP drafting in 1,000 extra officers in an operation costing £2 million.

Police snipers were positioned on prominent buildings overlooking the conference area. The snipers observed the passing demonstration and city centre through binoculars. Several people were arrested during the day, including disabled protesters in St Peters Square.

A small number of anarchist protesters were surrounded in a police kettling operation. The *Salford Star* reported that police told them they would only be able “to leave if they gave their personal details. This was refused and, instead, all were handed exclusion notices that ban them from the town centre during the duration of the Tory Conference.”

The demonstration was called by the People's Assembly (PA) group as part of a week of protest events at the Tory conference. The PA comprises the

Stalinists of the Communist Party of Britain, a few Labour Party “lefts,” the Green Party and pseudo-left groups, including the Socialist Workers Party-splinter Counterfire.

The march was significantly smaller than the protest at the Tory conference in Manchester two years ago, which attracted up to 80,000. That protest was one of the few organised by the Trades Union Congress since the forcing though of mass austerity by successive Labour and Conservative governments began in 2008.

This year the TUC played no part in the demonstration, as its entire focus is on the election of a Labour government on a perspective that is acceptable to big business. The last thing the TUC wants is any expression of popular anger against austerity to be voiced. At the TUC's annual Congress held last month, nothing was proposed to fight continuing austerity, including a further £12 billion in welfare benefit cuts, with General Secretary Frances O'Grady proposing only one protest—in London on October 17 at 4pm, when many people are still at work, that will last a total of 90-minutes!

The People's Assembly protest was addressed by Mark Serwotka, the general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services union, and Mick Cash, the leader of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union. Other speakers included John Rees of Counterfire, Kate Hudson of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and National Education Union leader Kevin Courtney—a supporter of the Socialist Workers Party.

The thrust of their appeal was to corral the millions who want to fight back into the election of a Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour government.

Serwotka, who postures as a “left,” declared that he wanted to “bring the Tories down,” while emphasising that “Jeremy Corbyn offers a radical Labour

government.” He combined this with news that his own union was organising a strike ballot over public sector pay and appeal to other unions to follow suit.

Cash rebuffed this statement, stressing that he too wanted to get rid of the Tories, but, “The only way you’re going to do that is through an election... We need a general election to get rid of these Tories.”

Cash is a right-winger who won the leadership of the RMT after the death of Bob Crow, a Stalinist and the official darling of the pseudo-left. For the last year, the RMT have isolated and sabotaged the struggle by conductors against the attempt by the private rail franchises and government to enforce Driver Only Operated trains, for which treachery Cash is paid a handsome £150,000 a year.

Corbyn is as opposed as the unions to any independent struggle by the working class. Asked ten times by the BBC during the TUC conference if he would support what would be illegal strike action under the anti-strike legislation in the Trade Union Act, Corbyn refused to answer. Corbyn left it to his right-wing deputy, Tom Watson, to confirm that Labour would not support such strikes, who declared, “We don’t support people breaking the law... we are democrats.”

The pseudo-left groups are desperate to conceal the fact that despite Corbyn’s public declarations in opposition to austerity, the many local authorities that Labour runs nationally have faithfully imposed austerity on behalf of the government for years.

None of this has changed one iota with Corbyn’s election. In November 2015, immediately following his election as party leader, Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell demanded that Labour councils continued to impose oppose austerity measures and not set illegal budgets.

The farcical character of the attempt to present Labour as an anti-austerity force was underscored when Pat Karney, one of the leaders of Labour-run Manchester City Council, spoke in opposition to austerity and “all those who have suffered welfare cuts under the Tories.” While he spoke, a banner was held up at the side of the platform stating that the council were nothing more than “asset strippers.”

Still, John Rees, the leader of Counterfire, said the People’s Assembly would function as the “praetorian guard” of a Corbyn government.

Kate Hudson said that Labour would get rid of the “pro-war, pro-nuclear Tory policy” and that we are “hearing now from the Labour Party that we will see an end to 30 years of neo-liberalism, that we will see an end to austerity.”

Corbyn is “the vice president of CND who will bring about a change in Labour Party policy, who will abandon those Tory nuclear policies...we will have a Labour government who will scrap Trident [nuclear weapons], that will say no to NATO and will end that wasteful expenditure.”

This is an outright lie. From the moment Corbyn became leader, he has opposed any struggle against Labour’s pro-war Parliamentary Labour Party who have insisted that the party continues support for Trident and its commitment to NATO. Both these policies were in Corbyn’s June 2017 general election manifesto, even as Britain is currently engaged in various NATO-led operations around the world.



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