

London demonstration underscores decline of Trades Union Congress

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On Saturday, Britain's Trades Union Congress (TUC) staged what has now become its sole annual demonstration in London.

The *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Mail* both said that 25,000 attended, while other newspapers wrote either that tens of thousands or just thousands were present. All reports were respectful, stressing a supposedly large presence, with the pro-Labour Party *Mirror* writing, "Waving placards and blowing whistles, they packed the streets and brought parts of the capital to a standstill ..." The *Daily Mail* and London's *Evening Standard* described the event as the TUC's "biggest demonstration for years."

This much is certainly true, but only because last year's event attracted barely 10,000 people.

However, given the fact that Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn spoke at the rally and the TUC threw substantial resources into event—the march was first announced last December and was in preparation for five months—turnout was very low.

The TUC's "March for the Alternative" demonstration in March 2011 was attended by around 250,000. At its 2012 "Future that Works" demonstration, between 100,000 and 150,000 were in attendance. At that time, sections of workers looked to the trade unions to oppose the imposition of mass austerity by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government.

Every subsequent protest, until last weekend's slight uptick, has diminished in size. This is thanks to the betrayals carried out by the trade unions, including the sell-out of the fight against the attack on public sector pensions in 2011-12, the betrayal of the strike by 50,000 junior doctors in 2016 against a rotten government-backed contract, and the sabotage of the fight by rail workers in numerous franchises against the

introduction of driver-only trains over the last two years.

The march was held just a few weeks after the Universities and College Union sold out a national strike by tens of thousands of university lecturers and administration staff opposing attacks on their pensions.

Saturday's demonstration amounted to a damage-control operation, as the union bureaucracy, Corbyn and their pseudo-left cheerleaders attempted to buttress the flagging authority of the unions.

More than 120 coaches were hired by the TUC, while many unions block-booked train tickets. "This march is set to be a big one," wrote UNISON, with "the TUC and other trade unions ... putting considerable support behind it. ... It's a march with a serious message [the amorphous demand for a "New Deal for working people"], but it'll have a fun, family-friendly feel."

With so many workers turning their backs on the unions, they sought to impress with paraphernalia, along the lines of protests called by the depleted trade unions in France.

But stripped of the dirigible balloons, colour coordinated union t-shirts, whistles and vuvuzelas, what was left was a few thousand union officials, many hailing from the various pseudo-left organisations, and a dwindling number of workers and young people.

In 2016, TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady boasted that the unions could rely on the sterling efforts of its "200,000 workplace representatives," but Saturday's demonstration was able to attract only a fraction even of these.

When the march assembled for the final rally in Hyde Park, the majority decided not to stop to hear the speeches. Only a few thousand were present to hear Corbyn speak, with numbers dwindling to just a few hundred for other speakers.

The reason for the paltry attendance was evidenced by the report on the situation facing millions of workers issued by the TUC on the day of its march. “A decade on from the financial crisis, real wages today are still worth £24 a week less than they were in 2008,” the TUC explained. “By the time they’re forecast to return to their pre-crash level in 2025, real wages will have been in decline for 17 years—the longest period since the beginning of the nineteenth century ...

“The TUC estimates that as a result of pay not keeping pace with the cost of living, by 2025 the average worker will have lost out on around £18,500 in real earnings.”

“It’s taking wages longer to recover from this crash than from the Great Depression and Second World War,” O’Grady told the rally.

The TUC speaks as if it has played no part in facilitating the massive and ongoing transfer of wealth to the banks and corporations. Nor does it choose to explain that the unions have overseen the loss of more than 1 million jobs in the public sector since 2008, with the numbers employed in the that sector falling from 6.4 million to a record low of just 5.3 million last year.

But this record has not gone unnoticed by working people.

Those who did remain to listen to the speeches were assailed with the usual hot air by well-heeled union bureaucrats, committing them to doing absolutely nothing. The message was that only a Labour government under Corbyn could reverse the attacks of the last decade, with O’Grady introducing Corbyn as “the man who is fighting for us ... he’s on the side of working people.”

Corbyn did his best to lend a progressive veneer to the assembled bureaucrats, with “jam tomorrow” promises to build 1 million affordable homes over a 10-year period, introduce new workplace legislation, clamp down on corporate tax avoidance and renationalise the railways. He even referred back 34 years, pledging that a Labour government would hold an inquiry into the Thatcher government’s organised police attack on striking miners at Orgreave in 1984!

The pseudo-left groups understand very well that Saturday’s march was a worrying development for the union bureaucracy. They are concerned that such is the bureaucracy’s alienation from the working class that they will not be able to channel discontent into safe

channels.

The Socialist Party wrote as loyal advisers, stating, “If the Trades Union Congress hadn’t organised a demonstration on 12 May, given the weakness of the Tories, we would be calling for it. ... The Socialist Party and the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) were campaigning for such a march in the summer and autumn last year.”

The Socialist Workers Party, which can normally be relied on to uncritically boost the TUC’s every move, was blunter in expressing its concerns, writing, “[I]t’s important to face reality. The Tories won’t roll over because a few tens of thousands demonstrate. The feeling of unity today has to be turned into strikes and sustained struggle.”

“[T]he trades union leaders haven’t organised the scale of resistance we need,” the SWP admitted. “There has not been, since 2011, a serious attempt at united struggle.”

The actual role played by the TUC, of suppressing rather than organising resistance, confirms the analysis of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) that the unions function not as organisations of the working class, but as tools of management and the corporations from which workers must break organisationally and politically.

In opposition to the forlorn appeals of the pseudo-left for a “change of course” by the union bureaucracy, the SEP urges the building of new independent, fighting, rank-and-file organisations—factory, workplace and neighbourhood committees—to mobilise the working class on a socialist programme in defence of its essential interests.



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