

Fascist assault on UK union leader Steve Hedley

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The brutal assault on Steve Hedley, Assistant General Secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, by fascist thugs Saturday is an outrage.

Hedley and his partner, Bridget, were among several people ambushed by supporters of jailed far-right leader Tommy Robinson (AKA Stephen Christopher Yaxley-Lennon) and US President Donald Trump.

The RMT leader was a key speaker at a Socialist Workers Party-led Stand Up To Racism (SUTR) event Saturday, organised as a counter-protest to a far-right demonstration by Robinson's supporters in central London. Witnesses say Hedley and others from his union were targeted after the rally by a mob while they were drinking in the Westminster Arms pub.

Pictures and video show Hedley bleeding heavily from a bandaged head wound. His Facebook account reports that Bridget was hit with a chair by one of the assailants and had to be admitted to hospital with problems breathing. At least one other person was cut on the head by a broken bottle.

Reports are thin, but it appears their assailants have still not been apprehended. The RMT leader and his partner, however, were amongst 12 people arrested and held for several hours by police.

The right-wing mob was apparently able to vanish into thin air despite a massive police presence on the day. But it is typical of events staged by the Football Lads Alliance (FLA) or Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA), which brings together the rump of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), the English Defence League (EDL) and various neo-Nazis.

Photographs and videos show Robinson supporters lashing out at counter-protestors with wooden sticks, kicking police horses and, at one point, menacingly surrounding a bus, driven by a woman in a hijab, bringing traffic to a halt.

Had workers or left-wing supporters behaved in such a way, they would have been kettled, beaten by police and arrested. In contrast, the Metropolitan Police have repeatedly treated the aggressive display by fascists in central London over the last weeks with kid gloves, including on the day of

the royal wedding.

All the more disturbing, then, is the muted response of SUTR and its supporters to the attack on Hedley. Among those backing the protest—although not in attendance—were Labour Shadow Home Secretary Dianne Abbott and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. To date neither has publicly condemned the assault on Hedley.

Neither has Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, despite his condemnation the previous day, during mass protests against Trump, of racism and fascism. Hedley reports that Corbyn telephoned "asking how we were." Nothing more.

Many of the featured speakers at the SUTR event are silent. A statement on the SUTR website lists only RMT General Secretary Mick Cash, and two representatives of SUTR as condemning the violence.

A report on the protest by *Socialist Worker* reduces the assault on Hedley to a single line. Likewise the *Socialist*, newspaper of the Socialist Party (formerly Militant), of which Hedley was a member until 2013.

Robinson was jailed on May 25 for contempt of court. He was arrested outside Leeds Crown Court for live-streaming a fascistic rant against "Muslim paedophiles" and "Muslim rapists" during the concluding stage of a child-grooming trial. His portrayal as a "free speech" martyr is a calculated attempt by sections of the political elite to cultivate a far-right movement along the lines of Germany's AfD and France's Rassemblement National (the reincarnation of the National Front.)

Organised by Make Britain Great Again, the neo-fascist rally on July 14 included representatives from the above, as well as the anti-Muslim Australian Liberty Alliance, Swedish Democrats, the Dutch People's Party for Freedom and Belgium's Vlaams Belang. It was compered by former Breitbart London editor and UKIP adviser, Raheem Kassem, while UKIP leader Gerard Batten denounced Muslim "rapists" as followers of a "paedophile."

If Batten felt able to speak so provocatively, it is because the rally had the support and financial backing of extremely wealthy and influential figures in the US and British elite.

Among the financiers of Robinson's English Defence League (EDL), from which he has since resigned, was Alan Ayling, then database team manager at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), in whose £500,000 Barbican flat it was founded in 2009.

The neo-fascist terrorist, Anders Behring Breivik, who murdered 77 mainly young members of Norway's social democratic youth movement in July 2011, cited Ayling as one of his inspirations.

At the weekend, it was disclosed that Robinson's backing goes much higher, to the notorious neo-con Washington-based think tank, the Middle East Forum. The MEF is headed by Daniel Pipes, a political representative of the extreme-right in the US political establishment and one of the primary cheerleaders of US military regime-change in the Middle East.

The MEF boasts that it is "helping Robinson in his moment of danger" by funding "his legal defence," "bringing foreign pressure" on the UK government for his release and "sponsoring and organising the second 'Free Tommy Robinson' gathering in London on July 14."

Sam Brownback, the US ambassador for international religious freedom, has also lobbied the government for Robinson's freedom.

On Sunday—the day after the assault—former Trump advisor Steve Bannon went on *LBC Radio* to demand Robinson's release from prison, describing him as the "backbone of this country" and saying people listening were "going to have to fight to take your country back." Asked if this was a "call to arms," he replied, "Absolutely."

Leading elements of the British government do not require "foreign pressure" to side with the far-right. On Friday, Bannon, a former Goldman Sachs banker, hosted a meeting at his five-star Mayfair hotel. Those present included former UKIP leader Nigel Farage and Ben Harris-Quinney, chairman of the Conservative Party think-tank, The Bow Group, founded by Geoffrey Howe and with a membership reading like a roll-call of the Thatcherite right.

Former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson and Tory backbencher Jacob Rees-Mogg—leading figures in the pro-Brexit campaign and potential leadership challengers to Prime Minister Theresa May—have also both met up with Bannon—a self-professed admirer of Italian fascist dictator Benito Mussolini. At the weekend, Bannon echoed Trump's barely disguised call for Johnson to replace May as prime minister.

Given Robinson's sponsorship by such figures, and the preferential treatment of his supporters by the Metropolitan Police, the SUTR's convening of a counter-protest to "take back the streets", with scant regard for stewarding, is politically criminal adventurism.

In the end, the SUTR could only muster 3,000 people, half the number assembled by the fascists, as the Labour "luminaries" backing them did nothing practically to mobilise anyone. It is only luck that the event did not end the same terrible way as a similar SWP-conceived stunt, with the death of teacher and activist Blair Peach at the hands of the police during Anti-Nazi League protests in 1979.

The SUTR, and Hedley himself, can repeat as often as they like the declaration, "*No Pasaran!*" (they shall not pass), but politically they repeat the tragedy of the betrayed 1936-39 Spanish revolution in which the fascists conquered power.

The opportunist politics of the SUTR diverts the necessary fight against fascism from tackling its source in the decaying capitalist system into support for the Labour and trade union bureaucracy—that has created the conditions for the growth of the far-right.

There was a time when a fascist assault on a trade union leader would have been met with mass strikes. No one even suggests this today.

Abbott and McDonnell sign their names to the STUR protest, knowing it commits them to nothing, just as Corbyn makes routine denunciations of racism, while presiding over a party in which the Blairite right—which was responsible for bailing out the banks, inaugurating austerity and backing the criminal invasion of Iraq—continues to pull the strings.

As for the trade unions, their silence on the fascist attack on one of their own leaders is of a piece with their complete indifference to their members, which has seen them preside over a historic decline in wages and living standards.

It is under these conditions that right-wing forces can exploit political confusion. Just as Trump owes his position to the fact that the Democratic Party's Hillary Clinton was considered as bad, if not worse, by sections of the population, likewise in Europe where the social democrats and their pseudo-left apologists are correctly seen as hostile to the working class, the right-wing seek to fill the vacuum.

Central to the defeat of fascism is breaking the political stranglehold on the class struggle imposed by the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and the building of a mass revolutionary socialist movement.



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