

UK People's Assembly protest shows Corbyn's role in demobilising the working class

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Some 2,000 people attended the People's Assembly demonstration in London on Saturday, called under the slogan "Britain is Broken, General Election Now."

The protest was much smaller even than last May's Trades Union Congress demonstration, when only 25,000 attended, and a mere fraction of the 2011 "March for an Alternative," when 250,000 demonstrated. Saturday's march concluded with a perfunctory rally in Trafalgar Square.

British imperialism is in the grips of a crisis of rule of historic dimensions, with the Conservative government of Prime Minister Theresa May paralysed and divided over its policy of leaving the European Union. Nobody knows whether Brexit, due on March 29, will proceed or not.

At the same time, May's austerity policies continue to pile unprecedented levels of social misery onto the working class. Not a day passes without a new indicator of intense suffering resulting from government policy.

In all probability, May will be defeated in tomorrow's delayed vote on her EU Withdrawal Agreement. She will likely face a vote of no confidence tabled by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, although Corbyn himself is being evasive as to when this might occur. Under normal circumstances, May and her government would already have resigned.

Yet a demonstration called against austerity and for a general election to bring to power a leader elected twice by overwhelming margins to head the Labour Party attracts a minimal crowd.

Under these conditions, a large and angry demonstration of many tens or hundreds of thousands might have been expected, with the organizers insisting

that the turnout dramatically increased the pressure on the government and exposed its isolation, perhaps preventing May from staggering on with the support of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party.

But the reality is that the Labour Party, including in the first rank Corbyn himself, and Corbyn's backers in the trade unions are opposed to any political mobilisation of the working class.

An Open Letter was issued January 11 in support of the demonstration. It was signed by two Labour MPs, including a shadow minister, and the general secretaries of seven major trade unions, including Len McCluskey of Unite the Union, Kevin Courtney of the National Education Union, Dave Ward of the Communication Workers Union, Tim Roche of the GMB, Ian Hodson of the Bakers Union, Dave Green of the Fire Brigade Union and Mick Cash of the RMT.

The letter declared: "We believe that ordinary working people must now play an active role in resolving this crisis. We cannot remain spectators in the destruction of our own future and we intend to demonstrate our determination to offer a solution for the Britain the Tories have broken and to demand a general election so that voters can act with a decisiveness which their leaders seem incapable of displaying."

The rally was addressed by Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell.

But this does not alter the fact that no effort was made to rally Labour's nominal 500,000 members, nor the millions of members of the unions listed, none of which laid on a single coach. The last thing the trade unions and the Labour Party want is for Labour to enter an extraordinarily fraught election, let alone come to

power, on the back of a powerful movement of the working class.

Corbyn himself left McDonnell to give his apologies for being otherwise engaged in a supposedly more pressing campaign—one that was invisible in the press and on social media.

Corbyn, Labour and the unions are acutely aware of the intensifying class tensions across Britain and Europe, as expressed most openly by the Yellow Vest movement in France. They know that none of the demands for an end to austerity that gave rise to a significant increase in strike activity last year, in a country where wages have fallen by one third in 10 years, can be satisfied under a Labour government.

Rather, Corbyn and his advisers hope to orchestrate as smooth a transition of power to Labour as possible to safeguard the essential interests of British capitalism.

In his latest speech on Brexit, Corbyn declared that the fundamental division in the UK is not between those who voted “Remain” or “Leave,” but “between the many, who do the work, who create the wealth and pay their taxes, and the few, who set the rules, who reap the rewards and so often dodge taxes.”

Such rhetorical flourishes cannot conceal the fact, however, that Corbyn offers nothing for the working class. His sole concern is to preserve class peace while he seeks access for British corporations to the Single European Market and Customs Union. This is epitomised by his describing a general election as a means of giving the “winning party a renewed mandate to negotiate a better deal for Britain and secure support for it in Parliament and across the country.”

The deeper the crisis, the more openly the Labour Party and the trade unions reveal their essential function as a political and industrial police force for big business over the working class.

Saturday’s demonstration was left to rely solely on the forces that the pseudo-left and Stalinist organisations—the Socialist Workers Party, Counterfire, the Socialist Party and the Communist Party of Britain—could muster. But unable to suck on the teat of the labour bureaucracy, these groups were left with little to support their claim that Labour and the unions can be pressed to fight in the interests of the working class.

The SWP complained pathetically that “The demonstration was much smaller than previous

marches against the Tories—a sign that the focus on Parliament has turned the focus away from the struggle needed to bring them down. And there were very few trade union banners on the march.”

None of this prevented Lindsay German of Counterfire from telling the rally in Trafalgar Square, “I want a general election because I would like a government which is a left-wing government, which is committed against austerity, which ends the cuts, which stops Universal Credit, which ends the ‘hostile environment’ for refugees.”

John Rees of Counterfire, after pointing to the Yellow Vest movement in France, insisted that “Austerity is the issue eating into working people’s lives and we can’t get rid of it unless we get rid of the Tory government. That is why Jeremy Corbyn is absolutely right to say that the thing we need now is a general election.”

McDonnell was left to declare, unchallenged, that “The Labour Party stands with you in opposing austerity, to end the obscene levels of poverty and inequality in Britain. We need a general election now to bring about the fairer, more equal society we all want to live in. We stand ready to take power.”

A more accurate appraisal of the Labour Party made its way onto the People’s Assembly Facebook page for the demonstration. Simon Elmer, of Architects for Social Housing, commented, “If you want to know what Labour will do for the homeless, ask the former residents of the Heygate, Aylesbury and Ferrier estates, ask the current residents of Woodberry Down, Cressingham Gardens, Central Hill and the other 195 London estates being demolished, privatised or socially cleansed by Labour-run councils.”



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