

Anti-Brexit ‘Put it to the People’ march mobilises hundreds of thousands

Robert Stevens
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Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of London on Saturday to call for another Brexit referendum.

The march, which concluded with a rally in Parliament Square, was called by the People’s Vote campaign—an alliance of politicians and pro-Remain organisations stretching from the Green Party, to the Liberal Democrats and Blairite wing of the Labour Party, to pro-Remain Conservatives.

In the days leading to the demonstration, an online petition, calling for the revoking of the Article 50 legislation authorising Brexit, was signed by millions of people, and has now been signed by more than 5 million people.

The demonstration and petition were a show of force by the Remain campaign for what is now the likely majority opinion among the population. A YouGov poll published before the march showed those wanting to Remain in the EU at 57 percent, as opposed to 43 percent for Leave.

That there has been a shift to support for staying in the EU is hardly surprising, given that the whole process of leaving the bloc has been an unmitigated disaster since the June 2016 referendum vote.

Saturday’s rally was held just six days before the UK was scheduled to leave the EU. However, due to the May government being unable to get support in Parliament for the deal she finalised with the EU in November, EU leaders were forced to grant May more time—allowing her a delay of Brexit to May 22, but on the proviso that she passes her deal in Parliament this week. If not, May has only until April 12 to propose a solution.

Brexit is favoured by the faction of the bourgeoisie that sees Britain’s geostrategic interests best served by becoming a free-trading, deregulated powerhouse allied to the United States and able to penetrate new global markets, including India and China.

In response, a central feature of the pro-Remain campaign is its cultivation of an “EU patriotism” and

insistence that the UK’s own national interest is bound up with being part of the world’s largest trade bloc, under conditions of growing inter-imperialist trade and military antagonisms.

This has had its impact, with many in the demonstration coming with their faces painted in blue with EU stars and wearing EU flags as capes. However, the vast majority came on the basis of a broad range of concerns, often of a progressive character, including opposition to anti-migrant policies and the growth of the far right.

Millions are fearful of Brexit’s impact on the economy and their jobs and the dwindling opportunities for the next generation—particularly due to the ending of the free movement of labour that comes with Brexit, on which many youth rely for employment.

These sentiments have been exploited to the hilt by the political reactionaries leading the Remain coalition, including Caroline Lucas, the sole MP of the Green Party, the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats.

Among the Tories speaking were Dominic Grieve and Michael Heseltine, the Thatcherite wheeled in to perform the role of “elder statesman.” Anna Soubry, who defected from the Tories last month along with two other Tory MPs to join seven Blairites in setting up a new parliamentary faction, The Independent Group, also spoke. Addressing the crowd were Blairites, including Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, David Lammy and Jess Phillips, alongside another Labour MP, Clive Lewis, who was advanced as representing the pro-Remain “left.”

A featured speaker in Parliament Square was Tom Watson, Labour’s deputy leader, who utilised the occasion to launch a de facto leadership bid. Watson broke ranks with the decision by party leader Jeremy Corbyn for Labour not to officially back the demonstration and support, at this stage, the call for an immediate second referendum. Referring to his absence, sections of the crowd were organised to chant, “Where’s

Jeremy Corbyn?”

Watson did not go far enough, however, and was booed by sections of the crowd for stating rhetorically to May, “I’ll support your deal through Parliament, or a tweaked deal if you’ll work with my party. But I will only let a deal through if you let the people vote on it too.”

Earlier in the day, pseudo-left groups organised in the Another Europe is Possible campaign assembled in a sub-demonstration. They made a collective feint of opposition to the worst “excesses” of the EU—its imposition of poverty and misery on millions by inflicting savage austerity measures and the murder of thousands of refugees by transforming the continent into a “Fortress Europe.” But all this amounted to was the amorphous slogan, “Remain and Transform.” Nowhere did they explain what the capitalist EU and its Fortress Europe was to be transformed into and by whom.

Faced with the reality of the pro-EU movement led by some of the most right-wing political forces in Britain, Socialist Resistance, the British section of the Pabloite United Secretariat of the Fourth International, proclaimed, “It’s irrelevant that many of its main organisers are Labour and Tory sworn enemies of the Corbyn leadership. When hundreds of thousands of people take to the streets, events run beyond the control of schemers like [Tony Blair’s former advisers] Peter Mandelson and Alistair Campbell.”

Socialist Resistance bemoan the fact that “under a different leadership the London demonstration could have united the struggle against the Tory government with the campaign against Brexit.” But they again insist that “whatever the intentions of the organisers” the protest weakens the Tories and “Labour needs to press home that advantage.”

These are dangerous political lies. Amid an unprecedented crisis over Brexit and the mounting threat to the global standing of British imperialism, there is huge social and political discontent affecting broad layers of the population.

Such is the existential crisis facing British imperialism that over the next days and weeks, any number of further destabilising events could transpire—including the removal of May, crashing out of the EU in a hard Brexit, the suspension of Article 50, a second referendum and possibly even a second snap general election. But without the working class being able to intervene under a leadership and based upon a programme that articulates its independent interests, right-wing forces on both sides of the Brexit divide will continue to dictate political

events.

This remains the case even if a Labour government comes to office.

Corbyn has spent more than three years now confirming that a government under his leadership would serve as a reliable partner of big business and would implement a programme dictated by Watson and the Blairites. True to form, he had nothing to say in opposition to Watson mounting the stage in London.

Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell told *Channel 4 News* on Friday how he had sought to smooth things over with Blair’s former director of communications and fellow unindicted war criminal, Alastair Campbell.

Assuming his habitual pose as the Uriah Heap of British politics, he said, “Alastair Campbell asked me whether I’d be going along and I said to him very honestly that by going there I might alienate some of the people who are strong Leavers who I want to bring on board.”

The Socialist Equality Party was the only political party at the rally advancing a perspective for the political independence of the working class. Its statement, Answer Brexit with the struggle for socialism throughout Europe!, warned:

“The greatest political danger is that Brexit is being deliberately used by the ruling class and its media to drive a wedge deep into the working class, subordinating workers to contending right-wing capitalist factions and preventing the necessary unified struggle against the common class enemy.

“The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for a conscious political rejection of such well-practiced attempts to divide-and-conquer. But this can only be done by repudiating any and all perspectives based upon capitalism and taking up the struggle for socialism.”



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