UK: Protesters condemn Johnson's proroguing of parliament "We'll wake up one day and all our rights will be gone if we don't stand up and fight."

Our reporters
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London

SEP members distributed thousands of copies of the article "Johnson's proroguing of Parliament: The British ruling class declares war on democratic rights" at protests throughout the UK, including London, Manchester, Sheffield, Leeds and Bristol. WSWS reporters spoke to those in attendance.

Laura from Kent attended with her friend Robert. They are university students. Laura said, "I think it [the suspension of parliament] sets a really dangerous precedent and a massive assault on democracy. It's really worrying seeing this happen all around the world. It's not just in Europe and North America. You have it in Brazil and the Philippines, all these despots. The elites have absolute disregard for ordinary people."

Robert said, "I read that only 13 percent of the country are in favour of shutting down parliament. Even Leave voters don't agree. They are saying I voted to leave the European Union, not to turn the UK into a dictatorship."

Laura said, "I think people with nothing in their wallets will really feel Brexit. There could even be bread riots."

Visibly upset, she added, "Three years ago I was feeling a bit optimistic but now I'm just exhausted. I think everyone is just exhausted and feeling hopeless—the fact that it comes to this." Ben agreed saying, "nothing makes sense anymore."

Retired school teacher **Barbara** said, "I think that when you prorogue parliament, what you're doing is you're not allowing people to debate the issues at hand properly. I've looked at Boris Johnson's domestic policies for after Brexit. He wants to give head teachers powers of "reasonable force" and make it easier to exclude pupils.

"This seems to be his whole approach to society and politics. He's trying to do the same with parliament, by not allowing parliament to properly debate the Brexit issue, by trying instead to suppress it. I think it is the thin edge of the wedge. You go on in that direction and you're moving towards a right-wing dictatorship."

Grace, a graphic designer, said, "I'm here because it doesn't feel right what Johnson has done. It's technically legal but a lot of things are technically legal that aren't right. It means that nobody that I could potentially have voted for gets to say anything for the next month about this event with massive implications for my future and my friends' futures, and I'm deeply uncomfortable about that."

Asked about the global attacks on democratic rights, she said, "It's definitely concerning. There are a lot of people talking about the echoes of the 1930s today. It is a dangerous comparison to make, but sometimes you have to make them. And maybe if we do something and take to the streets, we can stop us going any further down that path."

Grace added, "There are a lot of people who voted Leave for very valid reasons. I don't think anyone is offering any sensible way forward. But at the same time, we do have to stand up and say what we're not going to do is suspend parliament."

Kate, an alumni relations officer, said "It's the thin end of the wedge. We're in a strongly nationalistic environment and I really worry about what people in power will start doing if something like this can go unchallenged. What's really frightening is that the assumption now seems to be that people will not respond, that those in power can do whatever they like. It's important that we start to react and say there are lines we won't see eroded. This is bigger than Brexit, it is about our parliamentary democracy and whether we are going to keep it in the longer term."

Asked about the policies of the Remain campaign, Kate responded, "Undoubtedly both sides in the debate are rotten to the core and if we stay in Europe then I would like to see substantial reforms... One thing the referendum was good for was exposing people's discontent about the fact that we're all being screwed by capitalism. The referendum model was pathetically crude and didn't allow us to address these issues."

Computer scientist **Silas** said, "I happen to support continued membership of the EU despite the issues that exist there… This is an outrage that's trying to be passed off as just a few extra days [without debates], but any parliamentary business which started before the prorogation is then terminated, so that's sleight of hand as an argument."

"You can see the beginnings of a much more polarised Europe when you consider what's going on in Poland and Hungary, which is pretty frightening. Hungary has a rampant anti-immigrant programme."

Asked about the EU's role in enforcing austerity, Silas said, "Dismantling some of the power structures of the EU would be a good start. If you look at the Troika and the way they were able to decree down to Southern Europe in general and Greece in particular… I'm not against overthrowing elements of the capitalist system. I agree that the EU is a bloc which represents the financial interests of the multinationals, by virtue of them being a significant constituency that they serve."

Joe, an artist, said, "I started thinking recently about whether the planet is in the state it should be and if this is the way the world and the government should be. I feel like we live in a democracy of sorts, but I don't feel like that democracy really serves the people of this country—definitely not the working class. Prorogation will just be another step in cordoning off power in a certain group of people, who are generally Etonian-educated like Boris Johnson. This is another step to take power away from the masses."

Nadia made a home-made banner detailing the austerity measures imposed over a decade and their brutal results. It included the statement,

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“Solidarity with Leave voters who want better lives.” She said “I don’t think this [prorogation] is actually about Brexit at all. I think it’s just a way that they can eventually impose more austerity and siphon up more money to the rich.

“One of the important things about all this is there has been no discussion on austerity and why people voted Leave in the first place. I voted Remain but I’ve got loads of friends who voted Leave but the problem is I don’t think they would feel welcome at a demonstration like this. They saw a situation in which they could vote against the status quo and so they did. I’ve got enormous sympathy with Leave voters. They are not my enemy. My enemy is Boris Johnson and this government.”

Sheffield

In Sheffield, around 2,500 people rallied outside Sheffield City Hall. Labour Party, Liberal Democrats and Greens politicians addressed the crowd calling for “unity” in the fight against Johnson. “We believe the best possible deal is through membership of the European Union,” local Greens leader Natalie Bennett told the crowd—a line that was repeated by every speaker.

These calls for “unity” were challenged after former Blairite Labour MP Dame Angela Smith tried to address the rally. She resigned in February to join Change UK, a group of cross-party independents. Her remarks were drowned out by calls from the crowd who demanded she resign, slamming her as a “hypocrite.”

Alan Hides, a Labour Party member from Worksop, was among those who challenged Smith. “She’s a racist. She’s one of ‘the establishment’ as I call them, who have been going after Jeremy Corbyn on [bogus accusations of] “anti-Semitism” to get him out of the Labour leadership.” He said, “The 172 Blairites who have revolted against Corbyn should all be thrown out”—a course of action that Corbyn has steadfastly opposed since becoming leader.

Another Sheffield resident, **Adam**, said he supported the EU because he feared Brexit would remove worker protections: “A lot of the liberties we have here are tied to the EU, such as working hours and worker protections and even our human rights.”

He said of Johnson’s proroguing of parliament, “The government rules, in principle, with the consent of parliament and to try and prevent parliament from refusing that consent is scary. Leaving aside what it’s to accomplish, if Boris Johnson learns that he can just prorogue parliament for a while to get through any contentious issues that’s a very worrying precedent.

“The high-minded thing would be for Johnson to say, “okay, let’s undo that prorogation.” I don’t see him doing that. I don’t think we’ll end up in civil war— times are different because not everyone owns a rifle or a weapon these days. It was a requirement to own a sword in those times in case you were called up. So, I don’t think we’ll end up in a civil war, but I can definitely see it going that way.”

Julie said, “Everything is lurching really far to the right at the moment. We’ll wake up one day and all our rights will be gone if we don’t stand up and fight. I can’t understand why there isn’t a general strike. I don’t understand why everyone’s not saying, ‘We’re not having this’.”

June agreed, “Boris Johnson has got no mandate. A lot of it’s been about Brexit, but to me it’s not about Brexit anymore, it’s about our democracy and our rights being eroded. If we don’t stand up and say, ‘Not in our name’ then they’ll just walk all over us.”

June and Julie agreed the Brexit referendum had been used to divide the working class. Julie explained, “Five years ago nobody was saying anything about Brexit and look how quick they’ve set that division, alienated half the country from the other half of the country and how easily the media have done it and people have just bought into it. It’s scary.”

When SEP members explained Corbyn’s role in blocking a class response to Brexit, Julie replied: “Corbyn campaigned for Remain and reform, and yes, it’s not ideal but it has stopped the wars in Europe for the last 60 years and that’s more important. We don’t want it to break-up.”

June added: “If you’re saying these people are in it for their own gain, well, they all are. That’s every politician.” Julie added, “They all shit in the same pot.”

Leeds

In Leeds, up to 2,000 protested. Protester **Lenny Coates** said, “I’m here to protest against the decision of a few narcissistic sociopaths who are acting to protect their wealth. The decision on Brexit barely scraped through, but they are acting as if they had a huge majority.

“There is mass opposition under the surface. A lot of people are confused. They voted for Brexit because they thought it would provide more jobs and they were worried about immigration. These things were used to stir people up. Today there’s a global assault on workers. We have to unite against the common enemy.”

Emma said, “No matter which way you voted in the referendum, it’s a dangerous step to prevent parliament from having a say in the decisions this government is making. We’ve been lied to on a massive scale and that has undermined democracy already. This is another step.”

Susan Baxter said, “I am here to protest against what Boris Johnson is doing with parliament. I don’t care if you voted leave or remain. This is about democracy itself. It’s the first time I have ever been on a protest and I’m 76 years of age.”

Carol is a history and politics teacher who supports the Labour Party. She said, “There are a lot of issues that worry me, especially the proroguing of parliament. It undermines parliamentary sovereignty.” She added, “My mum is foreign, she’s been here 40 years. Now she has to apply to stay.”

Dee said, “I’ve come here to protest against Boris Johnson’s proroguing of parliament. If I don’t say ‘No!’ now I can see the possibility of not ever having the chance to say ‘No!’ in the future.

“This country is becoming less and less of a democracy. I don’t believe Brexit is good for ordinary working people.”

Daniela said, “This is a huge crisis. I think this country is becoming more like America with no welfare state. The working class is having to pay for it. At one time my mum had to do three jobs. It really upsets me when I hear on the TV about people who can’t afford to feed their kids. I know that’s true because I’ve lived it. And that was 10 years ago so it’s much worse now. I want peace and unity. We have to stand our ground. They are trying to divide us.”

Manchester

About 2,000 people protested in Manchester. After rallying in Cathedral Gardens, demonstrators marched to the city’s main Albert Square outside the town hall.

PhD student **Gabriel** from Brazil said it was important to protest the attack on democratic rights in the UK and he condemned the illegal arrest and imprisonment of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, “Julian Assange should have a huge flag [here]. Having a political prisoner is against the principles of democracy.”

Roma, a poet who works in schools, said, “We have a lot of issues with capitalism… We need people to be stop being so divided, it’s the whole divide and conquer thing.”

Hazel works as a cleaner and attended the rally with her daughter. “No prime minister has the right to close parliament… People died for the right to vote. The EU needs a lot of improvements,” she said. “It’s like a private members’ club. It scares me how many far-right parties there are in the EU.”

Hazel continued, “I won’t be a member of the Labour party again. I joined when I was 16 and it was 1997 when I left. People have forgot the working class, but without the working class they’d be nowhere. The politicians are trying to divide and conquer the working class.”

Bristol

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Several thousand protested in Bristol. They chanted slogans including “Boris is a liar” and “stop the coup.”

Mandy said, “I’m appalled at the government thinking they can just go over the heads of the public, it makes me so angry.”

Asked what she thought about the growth of the far-right in Britain and internationally, she replied, “The violence we are now seeing as a result of the far right is frightening, and it’s another reason why I attended today.”

Mandy agreed that the EU had imposed austerity in many countries, with Greece being used as a trailblazer. “Like the Greeks, we’ve had years of austerity which have produced untold misery and gutted public services. Having witnessed first-hand what they did in Greece, I know the suffering the people have experienced. I fear for the future, but I won’t give up.”

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