

The UK anti-vax movement is not an “ally” against Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer

Thomas Scripps
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Several political commentators have defended anti-lockdown protestors involved in a confrontation with Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer this month, providing an inexcusable amnesty to the UK’s anti-vax movement. Their statements mark a shift to the right by a petty-bourgeois layer ideologically hostile to the working class and now finding themselves in the company of ever more reactionary forces.

Anti-vaxxers in the UK have been unable to organise a Canada-style “freedom convoy”, even of the extremely limited kind seen in France and Brussels. Their most prominent appearance this year was on February 7 when a group hounded Starmer as he walked through Westminster, before police escorted him to a nearby patrol car.

The crowd chanted “traitor” and shouted “scum”, “child abuser”, “working for your new order”, “you’ve betrayed our country” and “you should be hung”, accusing Starmer of “protecting paedophiles” and not “opposing the government” over COVID vaccinations and restrictions. They had been given their lead by Prime Minister Boris Johnson who the week before had accused Starmer in Trumpian fashion of “prosecuting journalists and failing to prosecute [celebrity and serial child abuser] Jimmy Savile” when the Labour leader was head of the Crown Prosecution Service.

Various hypocritical denunciations from bourgeois politicians and journalists followed. But they were met with statements from vaguely “left” and “libertarian” figures which, rather than criticising the cynicism of the response, prettified or downplayed the right-wing barracking that had taken place.

Prominent Julian Assange campaigner and Scottish nationalist Craig Murray tweeted, “Keir Starmer was heckled in the street rather vociferously and angrily. Nobody hit anybody, nobody threw anything. Yet the ‘liberal left’ is up in arms because ordinary people have the temerity to demonstrate against a politician? The Chartists and Suffragettes were rowdier...”

George Galloway, the leader of the Workers’ Party of Great Britain, which is staffed primarily by ultra-Stalinist/Maoist figures, asked, “The leader of the opposition has an official car with police protection. Why then did Keir Starmer choose to walk through the mob?”

Kerry-Anne Mendoza, former editor of the left news site *The Canary*: “Feel truly sorry for people who think that ‘Starmer mob’ story is anything other than stage-managed theatrics to prompt outcry.”

The fascistic character of the anti-vax movement

All these comments, Murray’s above all, studiously ignore the political background of the protestors to present them as innocent victims of an establishment smear campaign. This flies in the face of reality. The people confronting Starmer were in London that day on a protest “to end all the

job mandates and the job programmes in the United Kingdom and the world... to end all the COVID regulations,” in the words of their leader Piers Corbyn.

To that end, the anti-vax movement has attacked vaccination centres and given platform to fascistic individuals like Kate Shemirani, who called for National Health Service (NHS) workers administering vaccinations to be hanged, and deranged conspiracy theorist David Icke. Corbyn led a protest last October which erected a gallows outside Parliament to threaten MPs voting for “vaccine passports”. Two months later he called for his supporters to “hammer to death those scum who have decided to go ahead with introducing new fascism” over the same issue.

One person involved in the Starmer protest, apparently arrested for throwing a traffic cone, has since said in a video that they had sent a “clear message” that politicians “can’t walk the streets alone anymore”. She is introduced in the clip as a member of Alpha Team Assemble, an anti-vax group including military veterans which has run training sessions for a “war” on “vaccine centres, schools, headteachers, colleges, councillors and directors of public health in every area.” Her interviewer is Michael Chaves, a fellow member, who has called for protests in hospitals where he claims, “families are being murdered by the NHS”.

Almost every public health measure this tiny and popularly despised movement has campaigned against has been obligingly scrapped by the homicidal Johnson government, backed by Starmer’s Labour Party. Their opposition is now focussed on opposing vaccination; railing like the last drunk at a party against the now abandoned, and always extremely reluctant and partial, implementation of public health measures; and, in the case of Starmer, allegations of paedophile conspiracies with clear echoes of the US Q-Anon movement.

Covering for the group’s far-right politics, its defenders have dishonestly emphasised the comments of a single member of the protest, William Coleshill, who asked Starmer, “Why did you go after Julian Assange?” Murray tweeted, “I am defending the right of people to demonstrate against politicians. The majority of the shouting last night was about Assange, nothing far right about it.” The line was gratefully picked up by Tory MP Chris Philp the next day, sent to the morning news shows to defend Johnson’s Savile comment.

Coleshill is a former Tory councillor, thrown out of the party for racism, who now runs the libertarian, anti-communist YouTube channel Resistance GB. He is a close friend of Piers Corbyn and last October demanded of Tory “Levelling Up” Secretary Michael Gove, “How do you justify the illegal lockdowns that have been pushed on this country?” He has the same place in the Assange movement as a cancer in the human body and should be excised from it in the same way.

A summary of the February 7 protest and the anti-vax movement’s world view would be that “globalists” have staged the “plandemic” in order to restrict the freedoms, and especially the ability to benefit financially from their private property, of the small business owner through invasive public health measures. Its different layers vary in how

openly they express the anti-Semitic connotations of this “globalist conspiracy”. One protestor gave a speech after the scenes with Starmer raging against “the Rothschilds”, who “controlled” every US president and gave “Trotsky \$20 million in 1917 to set up the Soviet Union.”

Petty-bourgeois radicalism and the perspective of “left, right unite”

Nothing about this movement is progressive, popular, or even politically repressed—in fact it is far better represented in parliament than most of the population. Yet Murray, Galloway, and Mendoza, and a host of lesser-known bloggers, tweeters and assorted keyboard warriors felt moved to hand a political free pass to the anti-Starmer protest.

They represent a current of petty-bourgeois “radical” thought, influenced by libertarianism, anarchism and Stalinism, hostile or disdainful towards the working class and seeking an alternative base for an “anti-establishment” movement. Rejecting the class struggle, they look for opposition to Starmer, the government and the corporations in the assertion of purely individual rights and liberties—rooted in appeals to personal or national sovereignty.

On such terms, they extend a hand to all manner of political forces whose assertion of their rights, whatever they may be, brings them into conflict with the Labour and Tory parties. The central argument asserted is that divisions between “left” and “right” should be viewed as artificial, a mechanism employed by the “liberal elites” to divide and conquer when the common aspirations of “the people” must become the basis for joint political action.

In the UK, this toxic perspective was championed in 2016 over Brexit. It was summed up by Galloway, who on a joint platform with then United Kingdom Independence Party leader Nigel Farage cheered Winston Churchill’s alliance with Joseph Stalin during World War II and declared, “Left, right, left, right, forward march.” Three years later Galloway shared a platform with Donald Trump’s fascist advisor Steve Bannon and told him he was “from the same ethno-religious background” and that he was right: “The only way that you have any chance of controlling the elites and monopolies and the exploiters is on a nation state level.”

Galloway was the most shameless proponent of the nationalist policy taken up by most of Britain’s pseudo-left milieu, supporting the right-wing-driven campaign to leave the European Union on the spurious basis that the British parliament afforded better opportunities for social reform than the structures of the EU. The Socialist Equality Party wrote that their position “does not merely muddy the class line. It obliterates it.”

Citing the “first responsibility of a socialist... to oppose the mixing of class banners,” the SEP called for an active boycott of the EU referendum, opposition to British and European imperialism, and the fight by the continent’s working class for a United Socialist States of Europe.

The next major left-right occasion was organised by the Don’t Extradite Assange official campaign in late 2020, calling on President Trump to pardon WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange during his last days in office. A host of reactionaries claiming to defend Assange and free speech, from Sarah Palin to Marjorie Taylor Greene, were given a platform on the DEA’s twitter feed.

Their plan was to appeal to Trump and his allies’ claimed opposition, from a fascist standpoint, to the “deep state” and even to Trump’s supposed opposition to war—with reference to his “transactional” foreign policy initiatives towards Russia and North Korea and even more occasional advocacy of the type of American isolationism prevalent among sections of his far-right base. Instead, Trump pardoned a host of far-right figures, including Steve Bannon and US mercenaries who carried out massacres in Iraq, as part of his January 6, 2021, attempted coup

which was by that stage well underway.

Appeals to Trump followed equally bankrupt calls on Johnson’s right-wing government, the chief jailor and torturer in the US manhunt of Assange, to exert Britain’s independence of America by blocking the extradition. This effort was revived in the episode over Starmer with the suggestion that protestors had been inspired by Johnson’s criticism of Starmer for “prosecuting journalists”.

This is patently false. The prime minister, who holds Assange captive and who as foreign secretary gloated over his seizure by British police, was not referring to the WikiLeaks founder. He was pointing to Starmer’s failed prosecution of two-dozen journalists in the early 2010s for paying public officials for stories, something Johnson publicly opposed at the time.

For the political independence of the working class

As the pandemic developed, the pseudo-left and large sections of the petty-bourgeoisie found common cause with the anti-vaxxers over vaccine mandates, which they opposed with claims of infringements on democratic rights. Now they are casting this fetid movement as an ally in the struggle against government authoritarianism and Starmer’s Labour Party.

The attempt was embraced by the Corbynite news site *Skwawkbox*, which asked of the incident, “‘Is this a Labour party or a party of the elite?’ Right-wing Labour leader bundled into car to avoid questions about attacks on rights and victimisation of journalist Julian Assange”. It commented, “Resistance GB is a right-wing anti-vax and anti-lockdown group that characterises itself as ‘true liberal’, but the themes shouted by protesters of the erosion of human rights and the assault on journalism in the UK will also be of concern to the left.”

Skwawkbox was given its lead by Jeremy Corbyn, who on January 18 released a video explaining his opposition to vaccine passports and mandates by drawing a line between them, “compulsory identification when you go to vote” and “a massive data bank of all our information”, in terms his brother Piers would readily agree with, and which were praised by several anti-vaxxers.

It is not possible to take some “themes” raised by the far-right and leave others. Resistance GB, Piers Corbyn and the rest represent a political tendency, the “human dust” identified by Leon Trotsky as the social base of fascism, whipped into a frenzy by right-wing leaders offering reactionary answers to the hardships of the pandemic. Their malign influence must be ruthlessly combated.

Whatever their anti-authoritarian pretensions, this movement has already proved with its attacks on health workers and educators that they would employ appalling violence against the working class. Piers Corbyn threatened Johnson and Starmer with hanging for a few months of vaccine passports; what would greet a socialist programme for the elimination of COVID-19, which would include lockdowns, vaccine mandates and other restrictions?

Doubts about the trajectory of petty-bourgeois libertarianism should be dispelled by the example of journalist Glen Greenwald, whose politics have led him to advance the Republican right, the incubator of fascist coup plotters, as an antidote to the Democratic Party.

In any progressive struggle in modern capitalist society, there is no substitute for the working class as its leading force. Attempts to bypass or replace it all lead in a right-wing direction. The primary task of socialists is the fight to achieve the political independence of the working class from all other hostile class influences and programmes in preparation for a revolutionary offensive against Starmer, Johnson and their shared policies

of herd immunity, austerity, and war.



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