

# England's local elections confirm Labour's disconnect from working class

Thomas Scripps  
9 May 2023

England's local elections held last week were a significant rejection of the ruling Conservative Party, which is presiding over the worst cost-of-living crisis in generations. They also confirmed the evaporation of any committed support for the Labour Party in the working class.

The Tories lost control of 48 councils, with more than 1,000 party councillors losing their positions. The Labour Party gained 22 councils through 536 local councillors, the Liberal Democrats 12 councils and 407 councillors, and the Green Party one council and 241 councillors.

Not all councils were contested. If they had been, the BBC projects that Labour would have taken 35 percent of the vote nationally, the Tories 26 percent and the Liberal Democrats 20 percent.

While this is the largest Labour lead registered in a local election since the party lost power in 2010, it comes entirely as the result of the Tories' collapsing support. Labour's projected vote share was unchanged versus last year's local elections, while the Tories were down nine points, which were picked up by the Liberal Democrats (up four points) and other parties (up five between them).

Labour's projected vote share would also not be enough to secure a parliamentary majority. The BBC's polling expert John Curtice suggests the party would fall 14 seats short.

Specific Labour gains highlight the ephemeral character of its vote. The major successes were recorded in the North, in the so-called Red Wall of Labour voters in England's former industrial heartlands which was substantially swung to the Tories by Boris Johnson's Brexit pitch. The Tory vote was more heavily down in areas that voted to leave the European Union than those which voted to remain, with big swings to Labour in majority-leave regions.

Robert Ford, professor of politics at Manchester University, told the *Guardian*, "Voting leave was a very

strong predictor of voting Tory. Now it is fading."

Labour's fortunes are in other words highly dependent on the movements of generally older layers whose connection with the party is so weak that swathes voted Tory in December 2019.

Naturally, these shifts are motivated by the reality of Brexit versus Johnson's rhetoric, and by the fact that issues such as the cost-of-living and the crisis of the National Health Service now play a much greater role in determining voting patterns.

But Labour cannot sweep up votes on this basis because it is making the most right-wing pitch in its history, based on support for NATO's war agenda, an economic policy determined by the banks and big business, and attacks on democratic rights. It has no popular base. Its election strategy is to disenfranchise as many people as possible, then beat the Tories among a narrow middle-class constituency on right-wing policy issues carefully curated by both parties.

Labour celebrated its local election results in appropriate style with another large step to the right, junking its previously claimed opposition to the Tories' police-state anti-protest powers. The Public Order Act was rushed into law four days ahead of the coronation and illegalises protests which cause "serious disruption to two or more individuals, or to an organisation."

Scores of people planning to protest at the coronation of King Charles III were arrested, including five members and the leader of Republic, a registered pressure group.

A statement from the Metropolitan Police explained, "a total of 64 arrests were made on Saturday, 6 May.

"52 of these related to concerns people were going to disrupt the event, and arrests included to prevent a breach of the peace and conspiracy to cause a public nuisance."

The members of Republic were snatched at 6:40am Saturday morning with police claiming material in their possession to be used for securing placards could be used

to “lock on”—which carries a six-month sentence under the Public Order Act, or 12 months if a road, airport or railway is blocked.

Republic was apparently warned by police ahead of time that anyone disrupting the procession “could be shot because the military around the streets might be a bit touchy,” according to the group’s director Harry Stratton.

The coronation was also the focus of the largest ever use of live facial recognition technology in Britain, scanning hundreds of thousands of people.

Interviewed about the arrests, Shadow Foreign secretary David Lammy was asked if Labour would scrap the anti-protest legislation. He answered that Labour “can’t come into office, picking through all the conservative legislation and repealing it.”

Shadow Communities Secretary Lisa Nandy commented, “It’s not clear in this case whether the problem is with the legislation, or whether the problem is more operational and a matter for the police.”

Shadow Public Health Minister Andrew Gwynne said, “We need to see how it’s working. And if it’s not working in the way the government say it’s intended to work then that’s something that needs addressing.”

A party spokesperson confirmed these remarks, using language taken virtually word for word from the Tories to say Labour would “ensure that the historic right to peaceful protest is protected alongside action to prevent dangerous protests or serious disruption.” They then used the occasion as a platform for Labour’s anti-migrant policies, adding that “Home Office legislation will be needed in a series of different areas” including “the chaos in the asylum system.”

These comments were made even as the Met was expressing “regret” at its own actions and right-wing commentators were worrying at the optics of the coronation arrests. Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who wears his anti-democratic record as Director of Public Prosecutions as a badge of honour, has no such compunctions.

Meanwhile, Shadow Health Secretary Wes Streeting was enthusing to the right-wing *GB News* about the “goosebumps” he was given by the coronation and “The huge military procession down the Mall.” The monarchy, he went on, is able “to bridge divides, actually, and we saw that yesterday with people coming together on a cross party basis.”

This follows Labour’s banning local party organisations from affiliating to Republic, along with the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, Labour Campaign for Nuclear

Disarmament, Stop the War Coalition, Jewish Voice for Labour, the Campaign Against Climate Change Trade Union Group and the Peace and Justice Project set up by Jeremy Corbyn.

A letter seen by the *Guardian*, sent by Labour’s acting head of regional governance and local government in the south, read, “Any such affiliations require approval from the NEC in advance. The following affiliations are therefore no longer valid, and the CLP [Constituency Labour Party] may not renew its affiliation without approval from the NEC.”

With the Blairites handed back total control of their party by the Corbynites, Labour is not only a pro-capitalist party like the Tories but indistinguishable from them. To the extent it makes an independent pitch for government, it is as a more competent version of the crisis-ridden party on the opposite benches.

Even Labour’s push for a majority government is framed less in terms of soundly defeating the Tories than keeping out the Scottish National Party—formally to the left of Labour and posing a threat to the unity of the British state.

However the votes fall in future elections, these fundamental facts of political life will not change. Widespread voter abstention, alienation from official politics and the sense felt by millions that their votes will change nothing are a product of the disenfranchisement of the working class, whose interests find no expression in any of the parliamentary parties.

This is the common experience of workers all over the world and requires a unified effort to build an international socialist party dedicated to ending war, social inequality and ecological catastrophe.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**