

# UK's local elections see Conservative rout and opposition to Labour over Gaza, but workers need their own party

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Britain's ruling Conservatives suffered heavy losses in Thursday's local council elections, losing nearly 500 seats with its share of the national vote at 25 percent, a record low.

With 107 councils contested, the Tories lost control of 10, with Labour winning eight and the Liberal Democrats two. The Tories also lost the Blackpool South parliamentary by-election to Labour on a 26 percent swing, their fifth in succession, reducing Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's working majority in the House of Commons to 47—the Tories came out of the last, 2019, general election with a majority of 80.

Labour also won several mayoral elections, including in London, Liverpool, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and the West Midlands. The Tories were only able to hold the Tees Valley mayoralty in the north-east of England on a much-reduced majority.

Amid talk of a move to oust Sunak and even of a July general election, millions of workers and young people will be happy to see the end of a government hated for its vicious austerity measures, attacks on the right to strike, refugee witch-hunt, and support for genocide in Gaza and war against Russia and China. But the elections above all underscored the absence of any genuine alternative to this party of right-wing criminals.

The main beneficiary of the anti-Tory tidal wave is Sir Keir Starmer's Labour party, whose policies on all these issues are identical to Sunak's. This is widely understood, indicated by the fact that Labour, despite its successes, failed to monopolise the anti-Tory vote.

The Tories lost 473 seats overall, around half of those it was defending, but Labour gained fewer than half of these, taking 186 seats. The swing to Labour was not as big as predicted, with Sky News and others noting that, if translated to a general election, it would not secure the

party a majority.

The Liberal Democrats, the party of the respectable middle class, won 104 seats. But the most significant expression of growing hostility to Labour was the vote for candidates opposed to its support for Israel's genocide in Gaza. This found its most concentrated expression in areas with a large Muslim population, but also saw a marked impact on Labour's vote in seats with large student populations.

The biggest party success was the increased vote for the Greens, who secured an additional 74 seats and who are demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and the end of arms sales to Israel. They increased their support in their main target city of Bristol, winning 10 seats to become the biggest party on the City Council.

Elsewhere the vote went to various Independent councillors, many of whom have recently defected from the Labour Party but also from the Conservatives.

Labour lost control of Oldham Council in Greater Manchester, with Independent candidates beating Labour in several wards, and in Kirklees Council in West Yorkshire, where Independents gained five seats. In Bradford, West Yorkshire, Independents beat Labour in six wards. Independents also won seats in Tameside and Bolton in Greater Manchester, Blackburn in Lancashire, and Rotherham in South Yorkshire.

According to analysis conducted by the BBC, in 58 local council wards where more than one in five residents are Muslim, Labour's share of the vote was 21 percent—down versus 2021.

A smaller vote was registered by George Galloway's Workers Party of Britain (WPB), and for the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) led by the pseudo-left Socialist Party, both of which made Gaza a central question.

The WPB is Galloway's latest political vehicle, having been expelled from Labour in 2003 by Tony Blair for his opposition to the Iraq War. It fielded 36 candidates in the elections, winning four seats. The most significant was the defeat of the deputy leader of Manchester City Council, Luthfur Rahman, in Longsight, by Shabaz Sarwar. Sarwar is well-known figure due to his leading role in the Smile Aid charity.

The WPB also won two seats in Rochdale, where Galloway became the local MP after a landslide by-election win in February, taking the seat from the Labour Party. The other council seat won by the WPB was in Park, Calderdale.

None of these politicians or parties offer workers and young people a way forward. The Independents are mainly, but not exclusively, Muslim politicians concerned for their own political skins and in many cases having no other disagreement with Starmer or Sunak's parties other than Gaza. It is likely that many former Labour loyalists will work to prop Labour up in councils where it has no overall control.

The political dead-end of such a protest vote is illustrated by the successful candidates fielded by Galloway's party. In Rochdale, Farooq Ahmed left the Labour Party 10 years ago, after hurling homophobic abuse at a fellow councillor, for which he was prosecuted. At the beginning of this year he was busy campaigning for the Liberal Democrats, before switching to the WPB.

In Park, Shakir Saghir was a former Tory councillor in the ward, as was his father. In 2007, he stood as a councillor in the ward for the far-right English Democrats.

Galloway is all over the media boasting of his successes, pledging to help deny Labour an overall majority and then using a hung parliament to press forward the WPB's demands. But even in the unlikely event that the WPB was able to repeat Galloway's by-election success in a general election, it is a virulently right-wing nationalist outfit dedicating as much of its programme to mopping up the support of disillusioned Tories as to appeals to be recognised as the "real Labour Party".

Its law-and-order rhetoric is epitomised by the declaration, "We are not soft-hearted liberals who believe that everyone is capable of redemption" and direct appeals to "the frustration of many police officers that bureaucratic systems and political decisions are weakening their ability to function". These officers "deserve our support".

The WPB proposes "a migration policy that reflects the

anxiety felt among the working class about an influx of migrants which appears to be out of control," denouncing refugees for swamping social services and repressing wages and pledging to "undertake investment in border security, including heightened sea-going and coastal patrols" to get "a grip on numbers".

While claiming to be "indomitable enemies of profit-seeking international military-industrial interests with a stake in war," they boast, "We will avoid war but we will also ensure that we are prepared for it... Any threat to our country or our interests will be met with a highly effective military response."

The Socialist Equality Party rejects the call to sink political differences to bring about one big anti-Labour Gaza protest vote. This is only the latest desperate manifestation of the insistence by myriad pseudo-left tendencies that Labour can be pushed to the left by mass pressure, coupled with an offering of a possible new Labour-style party at some future point, formed through a political regroupment under the leadership of various left-talking ex-Labour Party and trade union bureaucrats.

This is only made necessary by the abject failure of their last collective project of backing Jeremy Corbyn as a means of achieving Labour's "socialist transformation." Now they are reduced to begging Corbyn, who even refuses to criticise Starmer, to stand against Labour as their undisputed leader.

The SEP also rejects the lie of a "lesser evil" vote for Starmer's party, or any of its MP's who might formally back a ceasefire.

We will stand candidates in the general election opposed to the joint Tory/Labour party of war and fighting unambiguously for a programme of socialist internationalism. Our appeal will be to workers, especially the younger generation, to join our party and strike out on a new course—for the systematic mobilisation of the British and international working class against the Gaza genocide, against war in Ukraine and the Middle East, to oppose all attacks on democratic rights and the destruction of workers' living standards.



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