

Petition calling for British general election: a right-wing political initiative

Laura Tiernan

26 November 2024

A widely publicised online petition calling for a general election in Britain is a right-wing political initiative. As of writing, it has gathered more than 2.7 million signatures.

There are any number of legitimate reasons to demand a general election. Starmer's rabidly militarist and right-wing Labour government is launching war against nuclear-armed Russia, backing genocide in Gaza, supporting Israel's military assault on Lebanon, persecuting and deporting refugees in record numbers, and imposing brutal austerity on millions. But the petition has nothing to do with opposing any of these crimes.

Started by pub landlord Michael Westwood on Saturday, the petition has been promoted by Reform UK leader Nigel Farage and fascist oligarch Elon Musk.

The petition calls for a general election because "the current Labour Government have gone back on the promises they laid out in the lead up to the last election". Westwood voted Conservative in the general election and has told TV news anchors that the Conservative government ran a "steady ship" on Brexit, the pandemic, and war in Ukraine against Russia. He owns three pubs in the West Midlands and has condemned the government's 6.7 percent increase to the minimum wage and 1.2 percent rise in national insurance contributions paid by employers. He has welcomed support from far-right circles.

Richard Tice MP, deputy leader of Reform UK, tweeted his support for Westwood's petition early Sunday morning: "Let's make this the biggest petition ever". Farage shared the petition a few hours later.

Britain's right-wing tabloids, led by the *Express* and *Daily Mail*, leapt on board with articles promoting "the viral election petition". Musk—appointed by fascist President-elect Donald Trump to head a Department of Government Efficiency, earmarking \$2 trillion in spending cuts—tweeted his support for the petition: "The people of Britain have had enough of a tyrannical police state."

Westwood described Trump's election victory as inspiring, telling the *Express*: "people have seen what's happened over in America as well, and I think that's had a

knock-on effect that, actually, if people stand together and vote then we can make a change."

The petition certainly highlights widespread opposition to Starmer's government, elected barely five months ago on just 33 percent of the popular vote. Starmer's support has plunged further since, by 49 points, giving a net approval rating of -38. It is the biggest post-election fall for a new prime minister in modern British history.

Nevertheless, as the *New Statesman* reports, the overwhelming majority of signatories are "not [from] population centres, nor cities but rural, shire England". A heat map captured on Sunday from the UK government's petition website shows North Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and Essex deep red, with the *Statesman's* statistical analysis showing "this is a Reform petition".

As of writing, London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow and other major cities have recorded significantly fewer signatures than elsewhere. But Labour voters and others have signed the petition in growing numbers, citing a range of concerns, from Starmer's militarist escalation against Russia, to the government's nakedly pro-business austerity measures. This testifies to significant political confusion enabling far-right forces to capitalise on broad social anger and distress.

Central responsibility for this dangerous political vacuum rests with Jeremy Corbyn and his allies who have blocked the development of an organised left-wing and socialist opposition in the working class. Britain's complacent middle class pseudo-left organisations continue to furnish Corbyn with "socialist" credentials even as he reiterates his opposition to a mass socialist party to challenge and defeat Starmer's right-wing, militarist government.

Corbyn has maintained silence on Westwood's petition. To comment would highlight the dreadful consequences of his own abject surrender to Starmer's government, handing political initiative to the far-right. Corbyn and his backers (the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party, Revolutionary Communist Party) all called for a vote for Starmer's government (outside of the few constituencies contested by

candidates protesting the Gaza genocide).

In stark contrast to Corbyn's political prostration, the underlying sentiment in the working class has shifted to the left. Ipsos polling in September-October found 73 percent of the British public support an immediate and unconditional ceasefire in Gaza, with 81 percent citing concern for Palestinian civilians.

Musk's promotion of the Westwood petition shows how Trump's election victory is being used to strengthen far-right tendencies in Britain, including Reform UK, Tommy Robinson and similar fascist dregs. Corbyn would sooner watch this growth of political reaction than risk galvanising mass working class opposition to the Labour government and British capitalism.

The most important task facing genuine socialists is to uphold the political independence of the working class and to elaborate a socialist programme to oppose the drive by imperialism to world war, mass austerity and dictatorship led by the Starmer government.

The most reactionary response to such right-wing populist initiatives as the Westwood petition is to obscure the class lines. This is and always will be the preserve of George Galloway.

Galloway has seized on the petition, describing it on his talk show as "The most remarkable petition ever launched in the history of the British Isles". He continued: "Some fools complain about the provenance of the petition. They don't like the fact that Nigel Farage of the Reform Party are heavily prominent in it... Who cares who started the petition? It has captured the zeitgeist."

The only "zeitgeist" Galloway is interested in capturing is that found in the sewer. His X feed is a torrent of posts promoting economic nationalism, anti-immigrant scapegoating, religious backwardness and fascism. His frequent retweets from Elon Musk, Sahra Wagenknecht and Steve Bannon are interspersed with posts denouncing the Gaza genocide, NATO's war on Russia, state censorship and Labour's alliance with the super-rich, offered as part of his advocacy of a "left-right" alliance against "the Globalist elite".

Galloway's histrionics about Westwood's petition are absurd. He has apparently forgotten the Chartist movement (1836-1848), that mass movement for democratic and social reform described by Leon Trotsky as "the genuinely proletarian revolutionary tradition" of the British working class, presenting "in condensed and diagrammatic form the whole gamut of proletarian struggle—from petitions in parliament to armed insurrection."

But if we limit ourselves to online petitions, Galloway is still wrong. The largest online petition in British history is the 2019 petition calling for a second referendum on

Britain's exit from the European Union. It gathered 6.1 million signatories, including over 4 million in just 48 hours. Internet traffic was so high the government's website crashed multiple times.

The Socialist Equality Party called for an active boycott of the Brexit referendum in 2016, describing the Remain and Leave campaigns as "both headed by Thatcherite forces that stand for greater austerity, brutal anti-immigrant measures and the destruction of workers' rights." We upheld the unity of British workers with their class brothers and sisters worldwide, advocating the United Socialist States of Europe.

Galloway stood at the forefront of efforts to promote Thatcherite Brexiteers such as Jacob Rees-Mogg as "freedom fighters". Galloway trumpeted his political alliance with then UK Independence Party leader Nigel Farage, declaring that Britain's "finest hour" was during World War II "When we all went forward together—Mr. Churchill and Mr. Atlee and Mr. Bevan ... That's what we are doing here tonight. Mr. Farage and me... Left, right, left, right, forward march."

Galloway's support for Brexit served to embolden the far-right in the UK and across Europe, while weakening the political defences of the working class. As the SEP warned, those advocating a "Left Brexit" were aiding a right-wing stampede: "Having helped release the genie of British nationalism, they are politically responsible for its consequences."

Opposition in the working class toward the Starmer government and its agenda of world war and mass austerity is deepening. It will take explosive forms, sooner rather than later. But everything depends on establishing the political independence of the working class, firmly opposing its subordination to reactionary class interests, as part of the worldwide struggle for socialism.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact