

People's Assembly rally offers no real opposition to Starmer's war and austerity government

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The People's Assembly (PA) national demonstration held in London on Saturday confirms that the trade union bureaucracy has no intention of opposing the Labour government's agenda of austerity and war.

Nor will the handful of lefts who attended, whether kicked out of the Labour Party like former leader Jeremy Corbyn, or those who remain Labour MPs such as Corbyn's former shadow home secretary Diane Abbott. Corbyn and the rest of the platform offered nothing but the tamest appeals to the Starmer government to change course.

Called under the slogan "No to Austerity 2.0" following the cuts in pensioners incomes and welfare cuts announced by the Starmer government in its first year, the organisers were only able to mobilise a few thousand people in the capital on their march from Portland Place in central London to Whitehall, the seat of government.

As is usual for the pseudo-left and Stalinist circles who lead the PA, numbers were exaggerated with the organisers claiming over 20,000 took to the streets.

Even so this was a tiny number when contrasted with the claimed backing of the PA of 10 trade unions, including the two largest, Unison and Unite, with over a million members each, the National Education Union (NEU) around 500,000, and Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) almost 190,000.

None of these unions made any attempt to mobilise their mass membership for the demonstration other than lay on a few coaches with cut-price fares, with the march consisting mainly of minor trade union bureaucrats and their periphery. Many of these are members of the pseudo-left groups who relentlessly promoted and then turned out for the rally, including

Counterfire, the Socialist Workers Party and the Revolutionary Communist Party.

Most of the workers who did show up were of an older age group, with young people as rare as hen's teeth. This contrasts with the massive marches held in London for 17 months protesting Israel's destruction of Gaza and confirms that the trade unions have few members under the age of 29 and even less active backing.

The PA cannot organize the working class against Starmer because the unions it fawns over on have no record of struggle on which to mobilize anyone.

In 2022, with the Sunak Conservative government in crisis, the unions finally sanctioned a series of strikes as they were unable to hold back a mass movement of the working class after over a decade of brutal austerity. But over the next 18 months, the unions, primarily the 10 backing the People's Assembly, systematically betrayed every fight waged in the public and private sectors.

They did so in large part by claiming that bringing a Labour government to power headed by Sir Keir Starmer would bring relief from endless cuts and public service closures.

If the unions refused to mobilize to bring down a hated and tottering Tory government, it is little wonder that few believe they will launch a counter-offensive against a government they all support.

Ever since its formation in 2013, the PA has acted as a PR department for the declining number of "lefts" within the trade union and Labour bureaucracy. In 2017, John Rees, the Counterfire leader pledged that the PA would function as the "praetorian guard" of a future Corbyn government. After Corbyn was booted

out of the parliamentary party by Starmer in November 2020, the WSWs noted that it continued to operate as the “left flank of ruling class efforts to police an eruption of working class struggle, directing it behind a Labour government led by Sir Keir Starmer.”

The PA’s trade union backers are only urging that Starmer is more careful in imposing austerity and does not risk his government’s survival. Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the National Education Union, told the *Guardian*, “We appreciate that the government have a tight fiscal window to operate in, but we think they need to tax the wealthy more and start investing in communities.... because the only person who is benefiting from cuts to communities is Nigel Farage [far-right Reform UK leader]”.

PCS President Martin Cavanagh was given pride of place on the PA platform, but his union has presided over so many job losses over the last decade that its membership has been reduced by over 70,000 since 2012 (from 262,819 to 189,399 by December 2023).

Behind their friendly advice and timid criticisms, the main unions backing the PA also back Starmer’s staggering increase in military spending that dictates the government’s austerity programme. Over the next decade military spending is set to double to 5 percent as a requirement of NATO membership, meaning a war on the working class without precedent since the 1930s. Unite, the third largest union the GMB, and Prospect last week all backed Starmer’s Strategic Defence Review, urging only more military spending based on a “buy British” demand.

Diane Abbott focused her speech on opposing Starmer’s recent aping of notorious Tory racist Enoch Powell as he declared Britain was in danger of becoming an “island of strangers”, suggesting he was “quite wrong” to say this. But she spent the past year fighting to stay in Starmer’s racist party.

Corbyn, the rally’s featured speaker, began by asking everyone to wonder about “the kind of society, we could live in, rather than the one we do live in at the moment”.

Offering up yet another sermon, he urged that instead of wars that “rage around the world, the killing fields in Ukraine and Russia, the abominable deliberate starvation of children in Gaza and the genocide is inflicted against the Palestinian people... we need a world of peace.” This would be apparently brought

about through “the vision of peace, the vision of disarmament and the vision of actually challenging the causes of war, which leads to the desperation and the refugee flows of today.”

He didn’t propose a single action to be taken against Starmer’s government, ending with an appeal, “Let’s be together; for peace, for justice, for sustainability, but above all, let’s not go forward as a movement of despair. Go forward as a movement of hope...”

As soon as Corbyn finished, the media departed, as did most of the audience—with under a 100 people listening to the remaining speakers.

As far as the pseudo-left groups are concerned, it will be business as usual going forward. John Rees had earlier offered up yet more efforts to persuade Starmer to change course, announcing a lobby of Labour’s annual conference in Liverpool this autumn and declaiming that “We will be on the streets again and again and again, until this government either gives way or gets out of the way.” His final advice was for everyone to “Stay fighting, get organized. Get into your unions.”



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