

Hackney Greens Anti-Austerity Summit 2026: a coalition to impose council cuts

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20 September 2026

On September 9, Green Party-controlled Hackney council, led by newly elected Mayor Zoë Garbett, hosted a cross-party “Anti-Austerity Summit 2026” at Hackney Town Hall in London.

Ahead of council elections across England in May, the Greens had pledged: “A Green-led Hackney Council will host a summit of anti-cuts councils to coordinate a nationwide campaign to pressure the central government for overhauled local government fiscal powers and funding that truly meets need.”

The promise was part of efforts to capitalise on mass anger against Labour-run authorities that have enforced cumulative cuts of £24.5 billion since 2010, portraying a vote for the Greens as the start of a fightback against austerity.

Labour’s vote in the council elections collapsed. The Greens now control Hackney, Lewisham, Waltham Forest, Norwich, Mid-Suffolk and Hastings councils, with Greens-led minority councils in Haringey, Lambeth, Southwark and Bristol.

In Hackney, the Greens went from just four councillors to 42, taking most of the council’s 57 seats. Labour’s 43 councillors were reduced to 9. Greens candidate Garbett also won Hackney’s mayoral election with 35,720 votes, against Labour’s 26,865.

The 1.95 million people nationally who voted Green now face the reality that Greens-led councils are preparing to enforce the same cuts as their Labour predecessors. This was underscored at the anti-austerity summit in Hackney, where Garbett rejected calls to set “no-cuts” budgets.

Zoë Garbett: “committed to setting a balanced budget”

In the lead-up to the summit, Garbett gave an interview to the *Hackney Gazette* marking her first 100 days in office. She confirmed the Greens would deliver “fiscal responsibility”, telling the *Gazette* that as a councillor for the Greens under the previous Labour-run administration, “I knew the extent of the financial challenge faced by the council”.

As Mayor, she was now “up close to facing our financial gap of £53m over the next three years, the cuts that will have to be made this year, is a huge challenge... We are committed to setting a balanced budget.”

The Greens administration is currently presiding over cuts of £33.8 million set by the previous Labour-run council for 2026/7.

Garbett’s defence of austerity aligns with the stance of Greens’ councils across England. In nearby Haringey, the Greens have voted to accept auditor KPMG’s recommendations for sweeping cuts to frontline services, including housing and adult social care. In Waltham Forest, where the Greens hold an outright majority, the council has announced that £18.6 million must be slashed, including cuts to the Healthy Child Program, involving staff redundancies.

On Instagram, promoting the summit, Garbett declared, “Austerity has

torn this country apart. We don’t want tinkering around the edges. We need real change”. This was for public consumption.

It was an anti-austerity summit in name only, aimed at forging an alliance with Labour, Liberal-Democrat and Your Party politicians, trade unions, NGOs, and handpicked community groups who would help the Greens to “navigate”, i.e., enforce, austerity. Members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP) attended the summit, providing critical cover for the Greens.

Cross-party alliance

The summit was convened by a cross-party steering group led by Garbett. It features a who’s who of Greens, Labour and Independent councillors who are imposing cuts. Abu Talha Chowdhury, Cabinet Member for Finance, Assets and Governance for Tower Hamlets Council, for example, is part of the Aspire group of Independents backed by Jeremy Corbyn’s Your Party. Its councillors in Tower Hamlets have helped “absorb” £150 million worth of cuts over the past decade.

Opening the summit, Garbett announced that twelve political parties were represented and at least 13 trade unions. Delegates were tightly vetted. Community activists were handpicked from online applications. Efforts by the *World Socialist Web Site* to cover the event were stonewalled, with Hackney Council’s press office refusing to confirm our accreditation, forcing this reporter to turn up on spec. We were granted entry but told we could not record proceedings. So much for grassroots accountability and transparency!

Session 1 of the summit gave a flavour of proceedings, with Dawn Carter-McDonald, Chief Executive of Hackney council, delivering welcoming remarks. On a salary of £190,000 she was part of the team that executed what she described as “deep cuts” under the former Labour-run council, including to early health community centres. She hoped the summit would be a “catalyst” for “collaboration” to change the narrative around austerity. There were no boos or shouts after she spoke.

Session 2 was to have opened with a video address by Labour MP John McDonnell, but he cancelled. As Labour’s Shadow Chancellor in 2015, McDonnell co-authored a letter with Jeremy Corbyn instructing Labour-run councils of their obligation to enforce Tory spending cuts and a legal budget.

The panel session “Impact of Austerity: lessons from the past and asks of government”, saw Liberal Democrat Councillor Dave Watson thanking Green party councillors for their alliance in Southwark helping to “navigate” cuts. Southwark Council faces a £100 million black hole. Watson joked that he would not use the term “coalition” for “obvious reasons”—a remark greeted by laughter.

5 “Asks” of Burnham

The afternoon session, “Strategic Overview and Campaign Asks”, presented the Summit’s “theory” of change. Garbett presented the “five asks” agreed by the cross-party steering committee, emphasising these were “asks” of government and “not each other”. No demands would be placed on Greens or Labour councils to refuse to impose central government cuts.

The Greens would not defy central government cuts. Garbett explained, “I’ve had many conversations with incredible groups across Hackney about whether we would accept a no-cuts budget or not, to which we said that we would not allow commissioners to come in. So, we will be setting a budget that means that commissioners won’t be coming in. We’re trying to protect frontline services as much as possible.”

This is the same shabby apologetics used by Labour-run councils to justify decades of cuts: we cannot set a no-cuts budget because otherwise non-elected commissioners will be appointed to impose the cuts anyway, who will make even worse decisions. Better that we decide where the cuts fall, while, of course, protecting frontline services.

The “five asks” have nothing to do with fighting austerity. Ask number 1 is to, “Increase Local Government Financial Settlements to at least pre-2010 levels” [!] This would fail to address decades of central government cuts going back to Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair.

A raft of friendly amendments from the floor exposed the Greens, as one speaker put it, as “a room full of senior councillors and managers”. Garbett said the numerous amendments would be taken away, reviewed, and brought back towards the end of the summit to be agreed as the basis for an anti-austerity coalition.

But when Garbett brought them back from this “review” she had to stop reading the amended versions because, in her own words, “they are the same” as the previous draft. The proposals do not articulate the demands of the working class but of an upper-middle-class layer protecting their incomes and privileges at the expense of the working class.

The underlying perspective of the summit was laid out by Labour’s Simon Ripton. He presented the economic policies of the cross-party alliance, saying the money exists and that Labour Prime Minister Andy Burnham should be pressured to release some of it. Subtracted from this schema was a ruling class determined to destroy the welfare state and funnel billions more into military spending and to enrich the oligarchy—an agenda that Burnham is fulfilling. Ripton recommended Burnham’s document “Rewiring of the State”, saying the summit shares much of Burnham’s outlook if he could only escape the advisors of his predecessor Keir Starmer!

Pseudo-left friends of the Greens

It was during the section of the summit on “Campaigns” and “How do we organise together?” that the political alliance between the Greens and the pseudo-left—led by the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party—came into focus. A break-out group on “Campaigning” was run by Michael Chessum, former national treasurer of Momentum, Labour Party press officer and speechwriter for Jeremy Corbyn. He is currently Lambeth Council’s Cabinet Member for the Economy, Cost of Living and Empowered Communities for the Greens.

Chessum acted as the Greens’ point man, liaising with members of pseudo-left groups during the break-out session. There was heated debate about protests over Burnham’s upcoming budget, but no challenge to Labour or the Greens. While Socialist Workers Party members distributed

leaflets outside, they refused to identify their political affiliation during the summit sessions. SWP leader Charlie Kimber was present but did not speak.

Supporters of the SWP and other pseudo-left groups played a prominent role at the summit, wearing their trade union hats. Jordan Rivera, an executive member of Unison, spoke from the platform. In the lead-up to the Summit, Rivera had told *Socialist Worker* it was “great that the council is doing something”. In session, she politely appealed to the Greens to be “brave” and not set an austerity budget. Simon Hannah, Unison joint branch secretary from Lambeth and a regular writer for the Pabloite *Anti-Capitalist Resistance*, spoke alongside Rivera. He praised the Greens for organising the summit.

In *Socialist Worker* the SWP headlined their report of the event, “Don’t balance budgets on our backs demands anti-austerity summit”. It claimed that “The Hackney anti-austerity summit showed there is a fight to be had”. Reporting cryptically on a “debate about whether councillors should refuse to implement austerity”, the SWP refused to denounce Garbett for her refusal to set a no-cuts budget, concluding, “Attendees at the event agreed to set up local anti-austerity groups in different areas.”

The Socialist Party was more craven. They wrote on August 19: “The Green Summit could be a mobilising call to cohere these forces into the movement we need to take on central government and fight to end 40 years of wealth transmission from the working class to the capitalist exploiters.”

Outside the summit, SP members distributed a leaflet addressed to attendees, “The Socialist Party is proposing that this summit reconvenes after the 28 October Budget, with the aim of bringing together representatives of at least ten councils committed to refusing to pass on cuts and to maintaining services, alongside delegates from trade union executives and branches, to plan a coordinated national campaign to win the money back from central government.” The aim was “To force Burnham to fund our services.”

No one from the SP moved the party’s resolution, not even when Greens councillor Florence Schechter asked if anyone had any “substantial” differences with the five asks. Brian Debus, president of Hackney Trades Council, and a prominent SP member spoke immediately afterwards, advocating a no-cuts budget. But he neither read out his own party’s resolution—which he had been distributing outside—nor asked for it to be voted on.

Collectively, the pseudo-left ensured the Greens-Labour-Liberal Democrat opposition to a no-cuts budget faced no serious challenge.



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