

Britain - People's Assembly March against austerity: Irreverent defiance is part of the answer

Monday 14 September 2015, by [Socialist Resistance \(Britain\)](#) (Date first published: 22 May 2015).

One home-made banner on the Saturday June 20 demonstration against austerity seemed to put into words the inarticulate howl of anguish of millions. In colourful letters it read “fuck the fucking fuckers”.

It was a reminder of just how visceral hatred of the Tories is and just how all-encompassing their social counter-revolution aspires to be. The People's Assembly are claiming 250 000 marched from the Bank of England to Parliament.

There was a strong trade union presence, lots of families, groups of friends, environmentalists and activists from across the progressive spectrum. Mainly though it was a gathering of the young, the angry and defiant who were announcing that they understood what a Tory government means and are ready to stand up to it. The singer Charlotte Church is representative of this generation with her passionate, reasoned expressions of contempt for the new government.

If one person could be said to be the personification of the majority opinion among the crowd it was Labour leadership challenger Jeremy Corbyn. People supporting him had a very high profile, which was pleasantly surprising given that his leadership campaign was barely a week old and the Labour left isn't always very good at organising outside the party. If the decision were to be made by the marchers Corbyn would be certain to win the party election by a landslide.

This is unlikely. If he did win the party's right would push the nuclear self-destruct button within days and, in any case, most of the marchers were the sort of people who gave up on the idea of changing Labour from within a long time ago – even if many of them do still vote for it. And this is the strategic dilemma facing the movement.

The immediate aftermath of the election saw a small wave of local anti-austerity demonstrations and a significant increase in Labour membership. These were defensive reactions.

However, it's hard to find evidence of sustained and successful anti-austerity industrial action and the Tories are changing the rules to make it virtually impossible to have a legal strike in England and Wales. They know that the union leaders won't defy the law and that changes in working conditions are destroying mass understanding of the power of industrial action.

The Tory response to the demonstration was the same as the one on the multi-coloured banner. They were all over the press the next day bragging of their determination to push through £12 billion in welfare cuts and are confident they will get what they want.

This leaves us with a strategic impasse. The People's Assembly did a remarkable job organising the demonstration and building the coalition that made it possible.

However, there is nothing that resembles the movement against water charges in Ireland, the

astonishing self-organisation we saw in Scotland during the referendum or the repeated mobilisations in the Spanish state to challenge Tory and Labour support for austerity. More and bigger demonstrations are valuable but they are not a substitute for the molecular campaigns that are the sign of a real mass movement.

The other major absent factor is the emergence of a political expression of the movement. Jeremy Corbyn's campaign will end shortly after the summer. Those of us who argue that Labour is now part of the problem, and it certainly will be if Cooper, Kendall or Burnham win, are on the same side as the Corbyn supporters inside and outside his party.

The movement that will defeat the Tories and the pro-austerity Labour leadership is one that brings us together politically, encourages the winning of victories in local and national struggles and retains the youthful, irreverent defiance of that now famous banner.

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P.S.

* "Irreverent defiance is part of the answer". This article will be an editorial in the forthcoming issue of Socialist Resistance:

<http://socialistresistance.org/7553/irreverent-defiance-is-part-of-the-answer>