

Participants in UK marches denounce austerity

By our reporters
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Up to a quarter million people took part in protests in London and other cities in the UK over the weekend, in opposition to brutal austerity measures planned by the newly-elected Conservative government.

The WSWS spoke with many of those who participated.

Mo and Irena came to the protest from Bristol. Irena works as a volunteer at a food bank. She said, “That has really made me think that something has got to be done. I have seen so much poverty. My husband is working, and we are not as affected yet. But you see the people coming to the food bank and hear their stories and it’s just not right.

“You hear of people who have had benefit sanctions,” she said. “They are penalised for being late for signing on. One older lady who I saw had just had a breakdown. It turned out her son had been sanctioned for a whole week.”

The levels of austerity being planned in the UK would be on the scale of those imposed in Greece, she observed. “I was in Rhodes last year and saw the decline in living standards. There is very little work. They are struggling. It’s just frightening.”

Mo works for a private sector firm operating in the National Health Service. She said, “With the austerity we are being crushed. I feel so jaded. It’s like this demonstration. I’ve heard it all before. I know what they are going to say. And then after it, we’ll get back on our little coaches and go back to our little houses. We came here on the anti-war marches and there were so many people here. And what happened? I don’t believe anything is going to change just by us being here. I don’t.”

Cina lives in the Kentish Town district of London and is an early years educator and artist. She came to the march with her daughter Lillie. They carried a homemade banner reading, “Tories have blood on their hands.”

“I am here to fight against austerity. I was depressed by

the result of the election. So many people are suffering, and after the election it was like they were announcing the prelude to a massive funeral. And there will be a lot of funerals. We are already seeing people killing themselves as they were made redundant and they don’t know what to do next. It’s the level of despair. You’ve seen people dying because they didn’t get NHS care because of the cuts.

“The population in Kentish Town used to be a lot more socially mixed, with people from different classes. But now Kentish Town has become a place for the rich to be. My daughter is quite anxious about the future. I told her we might have to leave the area.”

Natalie came with several hundred students from the University College London (UCL). Some of the UCL students on the demonstration were currently participating in a rent strike:

“Austerity is leading to cuts in education and student services. There is constant outsourcing and privatisation for profit. It’s degrading so many public services. We think it’s wrong that the government continues to do this and it’s important that we are saying how bad it is.

“Staying in London is so expensive and there is so much competition for jobs.

“I saw that Doctors without Borders are now working in migrant camps in Europe and it’s just shocking. I can see that happening and everything being stripped from the public sector here.

“Back at home friends at school have not got jobs and are part of the long-term unemployed. Most people get benefits and it’s not enough to live on.

“In the university everything is becoming profit oriented. At UCL rents are just going up and up. They are just throwing money at commercial ventures instead of looking after the students. It’s the same ethos as the government, with everything getting privatised.”

James, a financial institution worker, explained,

“Everyone here today has an appetite to fight because they are not being represented.

“I am worried about the war danger. The government in here is involved in more and more conflicts in other countries. This is not in our interest as workers. The imperialist powers have their own vested interests no matter what they say. I am totally against any more military involvement anywhere in the world.”

Tracey, a care worker, said, “The structures of society in this country and elsewhere in the world are not fair for working people. They are structured in favour of big businesses. They are taking everything and not giving anything back, not paying taxes and paying their staff minimum wages. People work 50-60 hours to make ends meet. I work full time and many more hours if I can. But still I can’t afford to live on my own. It doesn’t matter what I do.”

Alex, a lecturer at Loughborough University, is partly Greek and was in Greece last week. “What’s happening in Greece is what the IMF did and has done every single time it has come in to offer money to other countries—imposing ideologically-driven austerity measures, reducing workers’ rights and environmental legislation, destroying social services.

“It is horrible, deeply unfair. The richest are barely touched, the middle class is destroyed and the working class is struggling even more. It should serve as a lesson. It is Greece now. It could be quite a few countries soon ... Portugal, Spain, maybe France. What is happening in the UK is a slightly moderated version of this.

“If we still think that our democracies are actually democratic we are deluding ourselves. It is capital that pulls the strings. The system is made to perpetrate the interest of the less than 1 percent and, whether it’s the Greek government, this government or any other, they end up subservient to the interest of those privileged people.”

Simone works for the Alliance for Inclusive Education (Allfie), which campaigns for disabled children and youth to be taught in mainstream schools. She explained how the government is cutting specialist services for them and the Disabled Students Allowance towards higher education.

“There is too much emphasis on trying to get union support when what we need is a different type of movement.

“I would like to see a political party that really has radical policies, but I can’t see one at the moment. I used to be a Labour Party member and now I am in the Green

Party. But it has become too mainstream.

“I am left and want to overturn capitalism, but what programme do we need to do it? Labour won’t provide it. They want to maintain it. So do the Tories and Lib-Dems. The Greens are not challenging the roots of capitalism.”

In Glasgow, Jack said that some of the union speakers where “lying through their teeth. If they would get up off their backsides and fight for their members I might agree with some of what they say, but talk is cheap.

“Take a look at the jobs that have gone in Scotland without a real fight taken up to stop it.

“My Dad was always talking to me about socialism. I think the time is coming when people of my age have to start taking politics seriously. I’m worried about Ukraine blowing up into a full scale war. Every day it moves one step closer.”

William voted yes in last September’s failed referendum on independence. Asked whether he thought it was a divisive measure against the British working class, he replied, “At the time no, but if you think about the whole issue after the May general election, then yes. I never took in the claim that independence would be good for workers down south too—you know, it acting as a catalyst. You are right when you speak of the history of fighting together internationally and what it has achieved being dumped.”

Sally, who is unemployed, said, “I haven’t had a good job since I left college. I don’t think up here we have better opportunities. If so, how come so many of my friends have left to go down to London?”

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