

UK Conservative manifesto outlines stepped up austerity and militarism

By Robert Stevens
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The *Guardian* described the manifesto of the ruling Conservative Party as a “break with Thatcherism,” while the *Financial Times* declared that it “rejected Thatcherite free-market economics.”

The manifesto proclaims that Tory leader and Prime Minister Theresa May will oversee “the world’s Great Meritocracy.”

These are transparent lies. Despite its many references to the plight of “working people” and “working families” being hardest hit by the crisis, the manifesto is centred on its commitment to Britain exiting the European Union (EU) and becoming a “global nation that is competitive, outward-looking and open for business.”

This is a pledge to intensify austerity and attacks on the working class carried out over the last decade. None of the austerity measures planned by May’s predecessor, David Cameron and his Chancellor, George Osborne, are reversed, with £9 billion in brutal welfare cuts to come. This is on top of a freeze on working age welfare benefits, which is retained in the manifesto, which will cost the most deprived more than £7 billion over four years.

The manifesto states that the next “Conservative government will continue the difficult but necessary work of restoring our public finances.”

Unprecedented attacks are to be imposed on pensioners—including ending the “triple lock” on pensions. This meant the state pension rose in line with earnings or inflation based on whichever was higher, underpinned by a pledge from Cameron guaranteeing an annual pension increase of at least 2.5 percent. This latter condition is to be removed.

Up to £3 billion annually will be slashed from public spending, with an estimated 10 million people to lose their winter fuel allowance, which will now be means tested. Paid to help with additional heating costs during the winter, it is worth up to £300 to some households. According to research by the Resolution Foundation, just

2 million pensioners will continue to receive the payment.

Millions of people will be forced to pay for the bulk of their own social care in later life. A £72,000 cap on costs, set to be enacted in 2020, will be replaced by a system allowing each family to keep just £100,000 in assets, with the rest, including homes, having to be sold in order to pay for social care costs.

Only three local authorities in England have median house prices below £100,000. In many parts of the country property prices have rocketed, with houses worth £1 million pounds in London not unusual. Not only will a pensioner have to sacrifice tens, if not hundreds of thousands of their savings, but they will leave nothing to pass on to their children—many of whom will now never have a possibility of buying a home.

Pensioners constitute the main part of the Tories’ electoral base, leading to fears that the party will haemorrhage support in the run-up to June 8.

The youngest in society will also suffer further cuts in living standards, with the poorest being hit disproportionately as the Tories commit to scrapping free lunches for infants. In a move estimated to save around £650 million a year, families will lose out by £440 a year for each child affected. The Education Policy Institute found that 100,000 children losing the free lunch are from families living in “relative poverty,” and 667,000 from “ordinary working families.”

The claim that May is ditching Thatcherism is based on the constant referencing of the section of the manifesto stating, “We do not believe in untrammelled free markets. We reject the cult of selfish individualism. We abhor social division, injustice, unfairness and inequality.”

Such nonsense is regurgitated without reference to the Tories’ record in office or what the manifesto actually outlines. It also requires drawing a veil over the hymn of praise to the profit system, which insists, “Capitalism and free markets remain the best way to deliver prosperity and

economic security, lifting millions of people out of poverty around the world.”

The harsh reality is that the world is more unequal than at any time in history, with a few billionaires owning more wealth than the majority of its population and billions of people barely able to survive. In Britain, tens of millions have been plunged into dire poverty by successive governments, including those led by Cameron in which May played a pivotal role.

While millions will be made to suffer, the super-rich and corporations will continue to have money shovelled into their gaping maw. The manifesto states, “Corporation Tax is due to fall to seventeen per cent by 2020—the lowest rate of any developed economy—and we will stick to that plan...”

Confederation of British Industry Director-General Carolyn Fairbairn supported the manifesto, stating, “With the world watching, now is the time to send a clear signal that the UK is open for business. Firms will be therefore heartened by proposed increased R&D spending, planned corporation tax reductions and a commitment to act on business rates.”

While slashing billions from benefits and from pensioners, the manifesto commits to almost unlimited military spending in preparation for war. It states, “As a global power, we have a responsibility to sustain our fine armed forces so that they can defend the realm, our overseas territories and our interests around the globe... We will play a leading role in NATO and maintain the ability to conduct strike operations, peacekeeping, security missions and the deployment of a joint expeditionary force. We will maintain the overall size of the armed forces, including an army that is capable of fielding a war-fighting division. We shall expand our reach around the world.”

The manifesto commits to the renewal of the £200 billion Trident nuclear missile system and boasts that Britain has the “biggest defence budget in Europe and the second largest in NATO. We will continue to meet the NATO commitment to spend at least 2 percent of GDP on defence and we will increase the defence budget by at least 0.5 percent above inflation in every year of the new parliament.”

Fully £178 billion in spending on new military equipment is outlined, with the document stating, “Two new aircraft carriers will project British military power for the next fifty years.”

To facilitate British imperialism’s war crimes, the manifesto confirms that UK troops will no longer be

subjected to the European Court of Human Rights, and “persistent legal claims... which undermine the armed forces...”

The manifesto’s pledge to protect and even increase workers’ rights, post-Brexit, is the most contemptible of all its claims. What is being prepared is a massive onslaught against the working class, with a bonfire of every regulation that impedes the global competitiveness of big business. Following more than a year of strikes by workers at rail companies, who are opposing the introduction of driver-only operated trains and the loss of thousands of jobs, the manifesto pledges, “We will work with train companies and their employees to agree minimum service levels during periods of industrial dispute—and if we cannot find a voluntary agreement, we will legislate to make this mandatory.”

The anti-immigrant measures of the government are to be stepped up, as a central means of dividing the working class. The manifesto states, “It is our “objective to reduce immigration to sustainable levels, by which we mean annual net migration in the tens of thousands, rather than the hundreds of thousands we have seen over the last two decades.” It pledges to “continue to bear down on immigration from outside the European Union.” “Leaving the European Union means, for the first time in decades, that we will be able to control immigration from the European Union too,” it declares.

Just a few years after the newspapers owned by pro-Brexit oligarch Rupert Murdoch were found to have committed criminality on an “industrial scale,” the manifesto scraps the second stage of the Leveson Inquiry into the media, which was to have looked into corporate malpractice at Murdoch’s titles. May can be assured of ongoing, favourable coverage by Murdoch et al. as a result.

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