

UK: Nationwide protests oppose Johnson's planned suspension of parliament

By Robert Stevens
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Tens of thousands of people demonstrated around the UK on Saturday against Prime Minister Boris Johnson's authoritarian move to prorogue Parliament for five weeks from September 9.

Johnson took the measure last week in order prevent MPs from opposing his plans to leave the European Union (EU), even without a deal, on October 31.

Demonstrations took place in around 80 cities and towns. Many came to the protests with their own home-made placards to register their opposition to Johnson's dictatorial move. Among these were "Stop the Coup," "Defend Democracy," "Your Majority is in the Minority," "Hands off our parliament," "Silencing parliament is not democracy," "This is the thin end of a repressive wedge" and "Bring down the government, they don't speak for us."

They were organised by a coalition of forces who are either outright opposed to Brexit, or the no-deal exit threatened by Johnson. Backing the protests were the Labour Party, Liberal Democrats and Green Party. Among the organisers were Another Europe is Possible. The pro-EU group is fronted by Michael Chessum, a leader of the Momentum group that supports Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn.

The numbers involved were vastly inflated by Another Europe is Possible, who claimed 100,000 were on the streets in London alone. Up to 20,000 in fact demonstrated in London along Whitehall and outside Downing Street, with protests in other cities ranging in size from 1,000 to around 5,000.

Last year a march in London organised by pro-Remain forces attracted up to 750,000 people in London. That Saturday's protests were not comparable in size is because many have lost any confidence that Brexit can be reversed amid general political revulsion at the entire official political setup—including the

protest leaders. The rallies were addressed by senior political figures from Labour, the Lib Dems and Greens as well as trade union bureaucrats. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn spoke at a rally in Glasgow. In London, Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell spoke alongside Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott. In Leeds, the Remain supporting Blairite Hilary Benn spoke alongside a Corbyn backer, Shadow Justice Secretary Richard Burgon.

The central message of the organisers was that the only way to oppose the proroguing of parliament and escalating attacks on democratic rights was by backing an alliance of cross-party MPs who plan to put legislation forward this week to thwart a no-deal Brexit.

Capitulating to his party's majority Blairite wing, last month Corbyn made a call to them, Lib Dems MPs and pro-EU Tories to back a "caretaker government" he would head. Its task would be securing a delay in Brexit before calling a general election. Interviewed by Channel 4 News Friday, Corbyn said "people should attend and support demonstrations around the country and large numbers of MPs of my party, and indeed, of other parties are attending demonstrations all over the country."

Corbyn said protesters should support moves by himself and other MPs "who are doing our very best to prevent a no-deal exit from the European Union because of the damage it will do to jobs, to trade, and it will pave the way for him to do a sweetheart trade deal with Donald Trump and all the damage that will do to our public services."

Speaking to the demonstration in London, McDonnell sought to cement the anti-Brexit alliance, declaring, "As elected Labour MPs across the country represent their constituents by joining in these protests,

I urge other MPs to think of their constituents whose jobs and livelihoods will be put at risk in a no-deal Brexit.”

In 2016, Blairite warmonger Hilary Benn led moves to remove Corbyn in a coup after he had been elected with the backing of hundreds of thousands of Labour members and supporters. Benn told protesters in Leeds that continued EU membership was now the only goal. In comments aimed at pressuring Corbyn—who as yet has not called for Brexit to be reversed—Benn said, “We all want a general election but when we have a general election we have to be sure that when a new government comes back—and I hope it will be a Labour government—we are still in the European Union—because there is no point in having an election if we have left in the meantime.”

While these forces are desperate to channel opposition to Johnson behind the main capitalist parties, the mood among many attending the protests was sober and questioning of why events over the last three years have led to the most right-wing government in living memory coming to power.

Among the protesters who spoke to the WSWS, there was a recognition that what was taking place was not simply about Brexit. But there was still a great deal of confusion produced by years of deliberate political disorientation. From the moment that former Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron announced in 2016 that there would be a referendum on EU membership, the main parties of the ruling elite and their media echo chambers have sought to channel the population into taking sides by backing equally reactionary factions of the ruling elite on the issue of Brexit.

There was concern among some of those that attended—under conditions of staggering levels of social inequality and a declaration of war on democratic rights by the ruling class—that none of the parties leading the anti-Johnson campaign had any progressive solutions. SEP members distributed thousands of copies of a leaflet of the WSWS perspective, “Johnson’s proroguing of Parliament: The British ruling class declares war on democratic rights” at the protests. Eagerly taking a leaflet at the end of the London demonstration, one protester said, “I hope you’ve got a plan because nobody else here has.”

Acutely aware of growing social discontent after a

decade of crushing austerity that has gutted the jobs and living standards of millions, sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy and their accomplices in the media are employing leftist demagogy to corral opposition to the Tory’s crackdown and ensure it does not spiral out of their control. Writing in the *Daily Mirror*, Labour MP Lloyd Russell-Moyle said a general strike was looking “more and more like the only way forward to stop our country falling into the hands of the undemocratic right.” He added, “[W]e cannot just rely on the courts and parliamentary process. We need a mass movement of resistance, with marches, civil disobedience and protests in every village, town and city of this country.”

Labour MP Clive Lewis said, “If Boris shuts down Parliament to carry out his no deal Brexit, I and other MPs will defend democracy.” In full flow he added: “The police will have to remove us from the chamber. We will call on people to take to the streets. We will call an extraordinary session of parliament.”

After Saturday’s protests, Another Europe is Possible has called for protests to be held every evening against Johnson’s move.

These are instructive events from which workers can draw many lessons. With the interests of the City of London and dominant sections of big business threatened by a chaotic no-deal exit from the EU, sections of the Labour and union bureaucracy are galvanized and ready to call for even a general strike! Workers should ask: Why were there no such proposals over the last decade during which the living standards of the working class were eviscerated, and millions thrust into poverty? Where were the calls for general strikes, occupations and emergency sessions of parliament at the news that at least 120,000 people have died unnecessary and premature deaths due to austerity measures and cuts over the last decade? To ask the question is to answer it.

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