

“The Fight for Our Lives” online rally

British pseudo-left and Stalinists unite in defence of Labour and the unions

By Thomas Scripps
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The combined forces of the trade union bureaucracy, pseudo-left, Green and nominally “left” pro-Labour groups were deployed on Thursday in an online “Fight for Our Lives” rally called by the People’s Assembly (PA).

Introduced as a platform “for campaigns to voice their demands to meet this emergency [the coronavirus pandemic] and for a better life after the crisis,” the event was backed by over 60 different unions, parties, campaign groups and media outlets. These included the Trades Union Congress (TUC), nine individual left-talking unions, Counterfire, the Communist Party of Britain, the Green Party, Stand Up to Racism, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Stop the War Coalition, Left Unity, UK Uncut, Extinction Rebellion, and Keep Our NHS Public.

The Communist Party’s *Morning Star*, and news outlets supportive of former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, *Skwawkbox* and the *Canary*, rounded out the list. Between them they provided a near-complete roll call of the “Labour left” and its political apologists.

The event was organised at a critical moment for the British and international ruling class. With Prime Minister Boris Johnson joining world leaders in preparing a return to work while the UK coronavirus epidemic still rages, the Labour Party and the trade unions are being increasingly exposed as loyal adjuncts of the Conservative government. While Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer works “constructively” with a murderous Tory government, the TUC and leading unions are in talks with the government, the Confederation of British Industry and British Chamber of Commerce in preparing a smooth return to profit-making.

Given Johnson’s intention to allow businesses free reign to risk the lives of their employees and the utter collapse of the Corbyn project of pushing Labour “to the left,” the political apologists for the labour bureaucracies are worried the government’s actions will unleash a tidal wave of opposition in the working class that they will be unable to control. *Union News* reported at the start of this week:

“Unions warn of mass walkouts over government return-to-work guidelines.”

In response, the official and semi-official “left” abandoned their nominal differences and closed ranks under the banner of the PA to demand that workers and young people show “solidarity and unity.” Ramona McCartney, national organiser for PA and a member of Counterfire, a breakaway from the Socialist Workers Party, told the *Canary*, “We wanted to pull everyone together to show that there is resistance to what’s happening and to unite. There’s a unity across these left-wing organisations.”

These organisations—each with its own long history of betrayals—were not seeking to unify workers but to organise themselves against the working class. What is meant by “unity” and “solidarity” is in fact an effort to subordinate the working class to Labour and the trade unions by mounting a concerted campaign to conceal their rotten dealings with employers and the government.

The 120,000 people who tuned in to watch on 55 platforms had at their core a relatively small but politically significant grouping—“the left”—whose members serve as ideologues, frontline organisers and, above all, firefighters whenever a demand for industrial action or anger at the innumerable betrayals by Labour and the trade unions threatens the grip of the bureaucracy. These are the voices who caution against “abandoning” the Labour Party, who rail against “sectarianism” in relation to the “mass organisations of the working class,” and who insist that the only role for left-leaning workers is to “put pressure” on the officially sanctified “leaders” of “the movement.”

From its first announcement, the rally pushed a demoralising and indeed demobilising perspective, summed up in McCartney’s comment to *The Canary* that “the biggest hope” for the event was “hope itself.”

Contributions proceeded in the same anodyne, Obama-esque spirit. Each speaker delivered a series of homilies before coupling a few wished-for reforms with

empty phrases about the need to “fight” and “take action.”

Counterfire member John Rees offered up the stunning political strategy that “the principle on which any social movement has to be founded” is the fact that “people aren’t dispensable.”

Amelia Womack, Deputy Leader of the Green Party, urged people to “lay the foundations for solutions” in the form of a universal basic income and a Green New Deal.

Alex Gordon, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Britain, told viewers that there should be “no return to neoliberal normality” and that “people can make a new political reality”—before raising the beacon of “socialist Cuba.”

Kevin Courtney of the National Education Union (NEU) and Mark Serwotka of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) insisted on the need to resist an unsafe return to work and for pay rises and a “New Deal”. They trusted those watching to pass over their records in enforcing a collapse in pay and conditions, and not to ask questions about when the “joint union action and joint campaigning” they referred to would ever materialise.

Dave Ward, the General Secretary of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), had the gall to stretch his rhetoric to the point of insisting, “We have to have action,” just one week after cancelling a threat to strike against Royal Mail, which his union has sat on for nearly two months as he offered his members up as a “fifth emergency service.”

The real policy of the trade unions in this crisis was underscored by the “day of action” organised over the 24-hours prior to the PA rally by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) through the People Before Profit: Health Worker Covid Activists group.

The day of action was meant as the SWP’s specific contribution to concealing the total inaction of the trade unions in defending their members during the COVID-19 lockdown. On Wednesday night, People Before Profit organised its own livestreamed meeting with Courtney, Serwotka, Sarah Wooley of the British Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU), former Shadow Chancellor and Corbyn ally John McDonnell and Unison, Unite and University and College Union representatives—to plan a day of demonstrations to precede the People’s Assembly online event.

But this only produced a handful of protests, made up of a few dozen union bureaucrats and pseudo-left activists in a few major cities with no participation by workers. Participants in the “Fight for Our Lives” rally were left with nothing with which to conceal their exposed backsides.

An hour-and-a-half of hot-air was brought to a fitting end by Corbyn and his acolyte Laura Pidcock, national secretary of the People’s Assembly. Like a vicar from some sleepy

country parish, Corbyn declared that people should “support each other during this crisis,” before concluding with the complacent declaration that “Together, when Covid is done, we will be demanding investment, fairness, justice and no more austerity.”

Pidcock declared that the People’s Assembly would channel the “energy” and “all of the suffering” of workers during the pandemic “into productive, positive pressure to change the system,” before hurriedly closing proceedings so that everyone could participate in a national clap for key workers.

The most striking element of Corbyn’s remarks is that even his wish-list for “fairness”, “justice” and an end to austerity implied no struggle against the government and the employers—and would only begin “when Covid is done.” This is said as millions of workers face mass unemployment and a brutal ramping up of exploitation once the ruling class succeeds in engineering a return to work.

Workers and young people should reject with contempt the hydra-headed apologists for the labour bureaucracy that collectively make-up “the left”. Overcoming the public health crisis and preventing the imposition of yet more savage austerity means overcoming the political crisis facing the working class. Taking on and defeating a barbaric ruling class and its state apparatus, not just in the UK but internationally, means breaking once and for all with the rotten leadership of the Labour Party and the trade unions and waging an independent struggle for socialism.

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