

Fighting deep cuts

Largest UK union protest ever

On 26 March about half a million mainly trade unionists came out onto the streets of London to protest the severe financial cuts in public services by Britain's coalition government. **Gareth Dale** describes this and other forms of resistance which he hopes escalate to halt the worst attacks on the welfare state since the 1930s.

It had been a long time coming. But as the tributaries of feeder marches wound their way towards Whitehall it was clear to us all that the 'March for the Alternative' had surpassed expectations. Teachers and refuse collectors, bus drivers and fire-fighters, young and old, converged on London to protest the coalition government's austerity programme.

With at least a dozen chartered trains, and some 800 coaches depositing their placard-carrying passengers along the banks of the Thames, even the police estimated the numbers at around half a million – the largest demonstration ever organised by British trade unions. It was so big, indeed, that some marchers didn't get close to the final rally in Hyde Park before having to catch their coaches home.

The bulk of the march was formed by the trade union contingents, flags fluttering and vuvuzelas squawking. But if most of the 1 000 or so banners were from unions, several score were from the Labour Party too, as well as dozens from other left parties.

Some marchers came with zimmerframes, in mobility scooters and in wheelchairs. (One carried

a placard reading 'If you want my benefits, you can have my disability'.)

Then there was a pack of black-clad anarchists. They skittered through the Oxford Street shopping district, lobbing flares and hurling paint bombs at shops and banks. One group surrounded three police officers and asked them how they enjoyed being 'kettled'. Shortly after, a huge wooden horse was trundled into Oxford Circus and set ablaze. ('Someone call the fire brigade – oh hang on, they've been hit by the cuts!' one wit was heard to remark.)

In the same precinct, 'UK Uncut' supporters were holding street-theatrical protests. The target of their campaign was corporate tax dodging including by the owner of Fortnum & Mason, an ever-so-English café and grocery store, which they occupied. 'There was a fittingly picnic atmosphere inside,' said one protestor – but that didn't prevent him and all his fellows from being arrested and taken to police stations across the capital.

Why, one of them inquired, were 145 people arrested, who had been doing nothing but 'sitting on the floor of a shop, singing

and eating snacks'? No protest, in Britain today, is too peaceful to be criminalised.

If the UK Uncut events sparkled with spirit and imagination, they failed to link effectively with the main body of marchers in Hyde Park. Had they done so they would have witnessed not only its scale but its social diversity and cultural breadth.

The 'Red Leicester Choir' was in attendance, as was the 'Zimbabwe Association', the 'Morris Dancers Liberation Front', 'Hands off Venezuela' and 'Queer Resistance' and not to forget the 'Association of Musical Marxists', 'Black Activists Rising Against Cuts', and the 'Spirit of Shankly: Liverpool Football Supporters Union'.

Humour was provided by homemade placards. 'It woz the bankers!,' said one. 'Where's Robin Hood when you need him?' asked another.

The 'March for the Alternative' was an urgently needed tonic for the union movement and the Left. It drew new layers into protest, re-emphasised the unions' presence in political life, and re-energised left-wing forces. If the more militant union leaders such as Mark



Serwotka and Len McCluskey are heeded, it will be followed by coordinated industrial action to defend jobs and services.

CON-DEM STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT

The target of the protests is an ambitious structural adjustment programme to drive through market 'reform', carried out by the 'Con-Dem' [Conservative-Liberal Democrat] coalition government.

It includes the biggest assault on welfare since the 1930s, which will see £81-billion clawed from public services, the forcing through of privatisations and evisceration of the welfare state. Only twice since the Second World War has any British government succeeded in cutting public spending over two consecutive years, yet the Con-Dems are committed to slashing public sector spending for four years in a row.

Even excluding the impact of government financial cuts, working-class and pensioner households are already feeling the pinch, as inflation outstrips real wages and pensions to a degree not seen since the 1920s. Being financially flayed in this way, workers and pensioners have little option but to

live on credit in order to make ends meet. The consequence is rising household debt that will, for the rest of the current government's term of office, far outpace the reduction in the public debt upon which Chancellor, George Osborne, is so fixated.

In 'structural adjustment' and austerity, Osborne's government is fanatical. 'We are making cuts that Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s could only have dreamt of,' said one gleeful Tory minister. Perhaps he had in mind the National Health Service (NHS), which is to be opened still further to private sector involvement.

According to the 'Keep Our NHS Public' campaign group, the Con-Dem plans 'the biggest ever privatisation of health care anywhere in the world.'

Other major targets of financial cuts include recipients of housing benefits, and people with disabilities, many of whom will be denied incapacity benefits. Social housing is facing cutbacks too, the Royal Mail is earmarked for privatisation, and outsourcing is set to accelerate as cash-strapped local councils transfer operations to cut-price private operators.

Higher education, is in the firing line too. University fees will be trebled and the Education Maintenance Allowance that enables young low-income people to attend further education colleges has been abolished. Higher education is being radically redefined. Once higher education was a public good, financed by the public purse, but now it will be turned into a consumer demand market in the form of 'student choice', financed by a generation whose working lives will be mortgaged to paying off their university education.

It was in further and higher education that resistance to the cuts kicked off. It began in November last year with a demonstration, organised by the lecturers' UCU (University and College Union) and the National Union of Students. Despite low expectations the event attracted 52 000 people, a figure that included many school and college students from the poorest parts of London.

The iconic moment of the day came when a large minority veered away from the main demonstration to lay siege to the Conservative Party headquarters near parliament. Hundreds stormed the building while thousands more gathered in its forecourt. This was followed by three further days of action, during which students suffered outrageous police violence and kettling, as well as almost 50 occupations in universities and colleges across the country. The student revolt even reached the ears of the nine-year-old son of Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, who asked his father, 'Why are the students angry with you?'

Taking their cue from the students, lecturers then voted in five separate ballots to take strike action in defence of jobs, pensions and pay. Strike ballots are taking place in the civil servants' union (PCS), and the teachers' union (NUT), too - all told, we are likely

to see over half a million public sector workers take strike action in June.

As the government tries to force local authorities to implement cuts at a local level, resistance has been brewing amongst their workers, and users of their services. Strike ballots are being organised, and town halls have been occupied, as have libraries and swimming pools facing closure.

In addition, the government's attempts to shift the costs of the crisis onto the poorest layers of society have provoked a fight back here too. They have, for example, breathed new life into the disability movement, spurring the creation of radical new groups such as Disabled People against Cuts and the Black Triangle Campaign, both of which have shown a willingness to engage in direct action.

MORE RESISTANCE NEEDED

But the cuts programme must not be defeated by no follow-through after the 'March for the Alternative.' A revival of strike action from its current low levels will be crucial.

In 2009 there were half a million days of strike action, only a third of the level of 2007, and well down from the 29 million seen in 1979. This summer may see coordinated national public sector strikes, which some union leaders have proposed.

However, if protests are delayed until the autumn many cuts to jobs and services will already have been forced through. Union leaders closer to the Labour Party, however, oppose coordinated action altogether. They are in partial support of the austerity agenda, and explicitly framed the official aim of the 'March for an Alternative' as a protest against 'the government's plans for *fast, deep* public spending cuts' rather than against cuts *in themselves*.

Likewise, Labour leader Ed Miliband chose his words carefully when advising the marchers, as they streamed into Hyde Park,

that the goal was to defend '*the best of the services we cherish*'. His spokesperson for Work and Pensions went so far as to describe the government's welfare programme as 'sensible'.

That the Labour Party mobilised its membership on 26 March was very encouraging, but if the 'Alternative' for which protestors marched in London is 'vote Labour, full stop', the protestors' energies will have been squandered.

Under Miliband, Labour's neo-liberal enthusiasm is only marginally milder than it was under former Labour Party prime minister Tony Blair. Its 'growth' mantra ignores the burning question of climate change. And Labour continues to presume that 'what's good for the economy is good for social justice'. Yet in Britain today the current economic 'recovery', such as it is, has been the most unfair in modern economic history, and only large-scale redistribution will reverse this.

Workers are not to blame for the economic crisis begun in 2008 and the Labour Party and the unions should not be playing the game of negotiating whose job is saved and whose should go. Britain is a rich country: in 2009, when in deep recession, the combined wealth of only its 1 000 richest people grew by £77-billion – a sum that puts the

'Con-Dem' financial cuts package into perspective.

If the austerity programme of cuts is overturned, it will be due to the weakness of the government, which is unpopular, and divided between its two component parties.

Unlike Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, this is a government which can be turned as we saw when it shelved its plans to privatise Britain's forests when it encountered large-scale opposition.

Its health reforms, similarly, are far-reaching, confused and unpopular. At the recent conference of the 'moderate' Royal College of Nursing, 99% of delegates voted a motion of no-confidence in the Conservative (Tory) health minister.

From within its own ranks, the government is accused of opening up too many fronts. 'When I heard that we were starting on health reform,' said one Tory, 'I knew how Hitler's generals felt when they heard he was invading Russia.' If the labour movement is able to follow through on the promise of 26 March, it stands a chance of halting the Tory *Blitzkrieg* (rapid attack). **LD**

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