

Brexit, Anti-fascist marches... What recent London demos say about the state of the British left

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Anti-fascist demonstration organised by Unite against Fascism and Stand Up to Racism in London on October 13.

Demonstrations on successive weekends in London last month shone a spotlight on major political rifts – in the major parties and in the political left.

On October 13, the extreme right-wing Democratic Football Lads Alliance (DFLA) had their march out-mobilised and disrupted by anti-fascist demonstrators. One week later, about 670,000 people turned out for a “People’s Vote” demonstration.

The People’s Vote march was ostensibly to call for a referendum on the terms of Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union. In reality, it was an attempt to re-run the 2016 referendum that narrowly voted in favour of leaving the EU.

Both demonstrations highlighted fault lines on the left. The huge Peoples Vote demonstration was dominated politically by the right-wing, pro-EU trend in the Labour Party, as well as the Liberal Democrats. Some pro-EU Conservative MPs also participated.

The left-wing leadership of the Labour Party, headed by Jeremy Corbyn, did not support the mobilisation. However, a smattering of local Labour Party branches and some trade unions took part, many marching behind the banner of the left-wing Another Europe is Possible campaign.

The October 20 *Independent* reported: “Masses overflowed through the streets of London for more than a mile, from Hyde Park Corner to Parliament Square ... They came from every corner of the UK, in what is believed to be the largest demonstration since the Iraq War march in 2003, when more than a million people turned out in the capital to oppose the conflict.

“Amid the swathes of EU flags and banners, there was also a growing sense that campaigners, MPs and activists were realising, perhaps for the first time, that this was a battle that could be won...

“MPs from across the political spectrum addressed the rally, including Green MP Caroline Lucas, Liberal Democrat leader Sir Vince Cable, Labour’s Chuka Umunna and Tory MP Dr Sarah Wollaston, who drew huge cheers when she compared Brexit to a botched operation.”

Behind the reluctance of Labour leaders to call for a new referendum on Brexit is a simple fact of electoral politics. Nearly two thirds of Labour voters voted in favour of Remain in the referendum, but most constituencies won by Labour in the last election voted Leave.

In particular, some economically depressed northern cities where poverty is rife returned huge Leave majorities. Corbyn and his allies do not want to be punished in a future election, or give ammunition to the Tory right who would accuse Labour of betraying the democratic decision of the 2016 referendum.

Nonetheless a huge majority of young voters, and Corbyn supporters inside and outside Labour, are hostile to Brexit.

Left debate

Important left-wing groups outside the Labour Party were scathing in their denunciation of the October 20 march.

Under the banner headline “Huge March for a People’s Vote boosts the big business agenda”, the newspaper of the far-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP), *Socialist Worker*, argued: “This was a huge mobilisation — the largest in Britain since the 2003 march against the Iraq War. It shows the campaign has struck a chord with sections of those who voted Remain in the 2016 referendum or who have subsequently turned against Brexit.

“But that doesn’t make it progressive or in the interests of working-class people... Whatever the individual motivation of marchers, it is a vehicle to deliver the big business agenda of defending the single market and the neoliberal, racist EU.”

The *Morning Star*, the daily paper linked to the Communist Party, analysis was even more hostile: “Their patronising demand for a ‘People’s’ Vote, with its implication that extraterrestrials or farm animals voted to leave first time round, oozes New Labour marketing style... the neoliberal media, including the BBC, has been wholeheartedly behind the People’s Vote project.”

The problem with this type of analysis is that it is entirely removed from the real meaning of Brexit. The EU is a bosses’ club, but simply saying that misses the main point. This was explained by Scottish National Party leader Nicola Sturgeon four days before the 2016 referendum, when she denounced the Leave campaign as an attempted putsch by the right wing of the Conservative Party.

The Leave campaign was conducted on the slogan of “take back control”, which meant keep out immigrants and break from judicial supervision by the European Court of Human Rights. The hard-core Tory Brexiteers, led by the likes of financier William-Rees-Mogg, want to make a bonfire of EU regulations that set standards for employment conditions and environmental regulations.

They have also used anti-EU rhetoric to attempt to witch hunt and exclude the hundreds of thousands of EU citizens who have come to live and work in Britain.

The October 13 demonstration by the DFLA - supported by a gaggle of extreme right organisations - was billed as being for “justice for women and children”. This opportunistic slogan stems from several cases in northern English cities of male gangs of Asian/Muslim composition grooming and sexually exploiting dozens of young women over a long period of time.

In run-down and poverty-stricken cities, grooming gangs were able to befriend vulnerable young women from poor and often dysfunctional families. They then used them for prostitution or rape by themselves and their friends.

These shocking events have been exploited ruthlessly by the far right to spread Islamophobic propaganda. Anti-Muslim propagandists ignore the fact that the overwhelming majority of child sexual abuse cases in Britain concern white British men.

Anti-fascist marches

The October 13 DFLA demonstration mobilised only about 1500 people, few of them from football supporters’ clubs. They were out-mobilised by two different antifascist demonstrations, which both numbered well over 1500.

First was a demonstration by what might be called the “traditional” left - Unite against Fascism and Stand Up to Racism. These organisations are associated with the SWP, but their march was supported by some local Labour Party branches, trade unions and campaign groups.

Marching separately was the so-called Unity demonstration. It was supported by many young people, particularly those associated with “antifa” trends like London Antifascist Network, dressed in black and wearing masks, women from groups like Women against Fascism and political groups like the libertarian/anarchist Plan C.

The Unity demonstration drew in a wider group of people who sympathised with what appeared to be a more militant approach to stopping the fascists and far right - summed up in the slogan “No Pasaran”. By marching very slowly in front of the DFLA, the Unity demonstration did indeed slow down, temporarily block and disorganise the fascists. They were denounced as “splitters” by the SWP.

This is just one event and it would be premature to draw fundamental conclusions about the state of the left from it. But some preliminary observations can be made.

The “traditional” far left groups - such as the SWP that dominated the Anti-Nazi League in the 1970s - are being politically squeezed and outflanked on a number of fronts.

Hundreds of thousands of radical young people have gone into the Labour Party to support Corbyn’s project. Labour under Corbyn has the most radical leadership of a mass party in any advanced capitalist country.

At the same time, a significant anti-capitalist, anti-fascist and feminist trend among young people has emerged that does not look to the traditional type of Leninist-inspired revolutionary socialist organisations that emerged after 1968.

With such a diverse phenomenon, precise definitions are impossible. The organised groups of this trend are mainly small and their composition fluid.

But a flavour of their general outlook can be gleaned from Plan C. Its supporters describe

themselves as “libertarian Communists” and reject fixed programmatic positions or organisational forms, other than the principles of being pluralist, experimental and non-dogmatic. They say they favour building movements over building an organisation.

These outlooks are common among young radicals, whether or not they have heard of Plan C. The main revolutionary socialist trend outside the Labour Party, the SWP, is hampered from winning support among young radicals by the terrible reputation it gained because of its reluctance to deal firmly with a leading member accused of rape in 2013. The SWP, according to long-time members, lost about 1000 people, more than a third of its membership, during this crisis.

For the moment, the fate of left-wing politics in Britain depends on the outcome of the push by Labour’s big left-wing majority to win the next general election and install a Corbyn-led government.

Whether or not that happens, the British left is likely to go through major changes and upheavals in the next few years.

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P.S.

• Green Left, November 5, 2018, Issue 1203:

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/what-recent-london-demos-say-about-state-british-left>