

Pro-cuts rally attempts launch of British “Tea Party”

Julie Hyland
19 May 2011

The “Rally Against Debt” held on Saturday in central London was billed as the start of a “radical Tea Party-style mass movement” in Britain.

It was called by a right-wing grab-bag—the Taxpayers’ Alliance, the anti-European UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the Freedom Association—to counter the March 26 demonstration against the coalition government’s austerity measures, backed by the Trades Union Congress, in which half a million people took part. Angered by the size of the turn-out for the anti-cuts protest, the organisers of Saturday’s rally claimed it would speak up for the “silent majority” who favour austerity measures.

Annabelle Fuller, former UKIP press officer, said she initiated the pro-cuts rally because she was “completely appalled” by the March demonstration. “I was incredibly frustrated that the debate was about whether you could cope with the cuts or not because actually there are people happy with this policy and we want more,” she said.

The *Guardian* wrote that Saturday’s rally would be a “fight back” by the “British political right”, in which “[H]undreds, if not thousands, of supporters of the cuts programme are expected to turn out at Westminster in a rare show of force by what organisers believe is ‘a quiet majority’.”

Right-wing journalist Toby Young, who is personally spearheading the Conservative’s so-called “Free School” policy, UKIP leader Nigel Farage and Mark Littlewood, former Liberal Democrat spokesman now director at the free-market think tank Institute for Economic Affairs, were billed as speakers.

UKIP representative Michael McGough revealed that his party had registered the name Tea Party, with the possible aim of running candidates in elections. “[W]e have set it up so we feel we can use it any time we want

to get it off the ground,” he said.

In the event, fewer than 350 people are claimed by organisers to have attended the rally.

Pause for a moment and consider that likely inflated figure. That is all that could be mustered by UKIP (considered a serious electoral challenge to the Conservative Party), the Taxpayers’ Alliance (given column inches daily in the media), and various right-wing bloggers combined.

The attendance prompted the observation that it was less a protest than a long queue—in fact, not a particularly long one by British standards.

How could it have been otherwise?

The rally had the character of a provocation. Littlewood had complained, “There seems to be a belief that the only reason we are in these problems is the behaviour of a few bankers in 2008, but it is down to collective greed of the voting population of this country. We need considerably more cuts.”

Banners on the rally included “Cut deeper” and “Libraries suck”, while those assembled chanted, “What do we want? Cuts! When do we want them? Now!”

Meanwhile, in the real world, unemployment is at a 17-year high, with 2.53 million jobless (almost 1 million of whom are aged below 24 years of age). For the first time since the 1870s, real earnings have contracted for the fourth year in row. In a similar historical comparison, the income disparity between the top 0.1 percent of earners and the rest has grown so that, on current trends, by 2030 it will have returned to levels under Queen Victoria, according to the High Pay Commission.

As for the rally organisers’ claim that Britain is faced with potential state of bankruptcy because of “too generous” public sector pay and pensions and

“bloated” state provisions, again, in real life, millions struggle to get by on miserly stipends, and millions more have to fight to access public services, much of them inadequate even before the cuts take effect.

And, as Littlewood backhandedly acknowledged, most people realise that the real cause of the growing state deficit: the near-trillion-pound bailout given to the banks from public funds by the Labour government following the financial crash of 2008, and the rising cost of servicing that debt even as the CEOs of the rescued institutions continue to pay themselves massive bonuses.

Having built the rally up in a major event in the weeks before, the media dealt with the minuscule turnout by proceeding as if it had never occurred. Only a handful of news stories reporting the rally appeared, none of which attempted to analyse the discrepancy between claim and reality. John Harris did comment briefly in the *Guardian*, but then, as he admitted, “chiefly to gloat”.

Schadenfreude is, however, entirely inappropriate. Notwithstanding the derisory attendance, it is still the demands of those who organised Saturday’s rally that are dictating the political agenda.

How is this to be accounted for? The coalition government’s austerity measures are expected to push more than a million more people into poverty and to cause enormous economic hardship, even before the impact of rising inflation, mortgages and the prospect of a double-dip recession is taken into account.

That is why some half-a-million people turned out on March 26. It is also what drove tens of thousands of young people onto the streets of London to protest against the tripling in university tuition fees and the abolition of the means-tested Education Maintenance Allowance. Only last week, thousands demonstrated in Central London against the attack on sickness and incapacity benefits.

But despite the TUC demonstration being labelled the “March for an Alternative”, nothing of the sort is being put forward by Labour or the trade unions.

Labour leader Ed Miliband attended the TUC demonstration only in order to tell the crowds that cuts *were* necessary. Labour-controlled local authorities across the country are pushing through massive cuts in public spending.

As for the TUC, the March 26 demonstration was a

token protest, intended to let off steam and cover over the complicity of the trade unions with the austerity measures that has seen them sabotage any genuine offensive against the government.

This is the real reason why the abject failure of Saturday’s rally was greeted with near silence. As the *World Socialist Web Site* commented previously, the large turnout for the March 26 demonstration took the TUC, and many others, by surprise. It showed that the trade unions were sitting on a well of pent-up anger.

In the days following, the media, most notably the *Guardian*, responded with undisguised hostility to the protest.

Even before Fuller and her right-wing friends had begun sounding off, the *Guardian* began its own ideological offensive with the intention of “proving” that the anti-cuts protest was unrepresentative of the majority of the population who supported government policy.

In contrast to previous polls, an opinion poll commissioned by the *Guardian* contrived to show that some 57 percent of the public were in favour of cuts.

The aim was to cut down to size those who may have been emboldened by the numbers on the protest to press demands for a fight-back against government policy. The anti-cuts protest was unrepresentative, went the refrain. It was the *Guardian*’s opinion poll that truly reflected the views of the “silent majority,” it warned.

Saturday’s pathetic gathering showed not only who really is in the minority. It exposed the extraordinarily narrow social base on which the entire political establishment and its austerity measures rest.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact