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Britain

Political volatility despite the limits of the fightback against austerity

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Tens of thousands of trade unionists marched in London on October 18th in a demonstration called by the TUC, the unified British trade union confederation, under the slogan 'Britain needs a pay rise'. Since 2008 the average worker has lost about £2000 in annual income. Britain is the fastest growing G7 member with 3% growth this year and an official unemployment rate of 6%. But working people are not experiencing the benefits. Why is this? Millions have been forced to take pay cuts or reduced hours. Two million workers have been re-classified as self-employed earning less money and not sick pay. If you add the huge cuts in social spending this explains why surveys still show high levels of dissatisfaction and give the Labour Party a three point lead over the Conservatives with 32% in the polls.

Over 80% of the demonstrators were public sector workers. Lower paid workers, particularly women from the Health sector, were prominent. Strike action in the National Health Service in the week before the demonstration helped in mobilising people for the demonstration whereas the other strikes in local government had been called off. However the demonstration was significantly smaller than last year's. Resistance among working people is still weak, marked by decades of defeats, the effects of austerity and the continued rightwards shift of their 'traditional' ally, the Labour Party.

Ed Miliband – the British Hollande – says any future Labour government would respect the existing budget constraints. Labour would make spending cuts and respect the welfare cap established by this government. The welfare cap cuts the amount of welfare support that a family can receive. Only 12 'left' Labour MPs (all veterans over 60 years old!) voted against this welfare cap. Miliband appears just like an intellectual who has never had a real job and cannot relate to ordinary people. Labour act like a defensive football team who are hoping to win one-nil. It thinks it can win the election by keeping steady while the Tories lose votes to the anti-EU UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party). The problem is that Labour's opposition is so lack lustre that it is also losing support to UKIP and the resurgent Greens. Since the demonstration there have been significant rumblings of opposition inside the Labour Party with supposedly twenty shadow ministers and senior MPs calling for a change of leadership. The favoured candidate, Alan Johnson who has amore working class background but is, if anything a bit to the right of Miliband, is refusing at present to be drafted in as an unchallenged replacement. Outside this political bubble people are angry and frustrated with the Westminster political caste and are turning away from the mainstream parties.

There is a crisis of the political system primarily caused by austerity politics. In Britain this is aggravated by the issue of EU membership and the Scottish question. Opposition to the EU has been reinforced by anti-migrant resentment since the majority now come from the EU. If you add the devastating social effects of austerity and distrust of politicians fuelled by expenses scandals then you have a potent mix which has helped the rise of the racist UKIP party. Already the largest single party at the European elections UKIP recently won its first parliamentary seat and looks likely to win a second one – both with candidates who have split from the Conservatives. UKIP also threatens Labour as it came within 600 votes of winning a Labour-held seat near Manchester. The Conservatives and Labour are now imitating UKIP in promoting a tougher line against migrants.

At the demonstration left-leaning trade union leader, Len McCluskey, called for Miliband to be bold and not implement austerity-lite policies. But he creates illusions by talking as if Miliband would steer left if he could just face down his Blairite advisors. Mark Serotka, civil servant leader, talks more realistically, but vaguely, about the need to build a left movement, even a new party, to challenge Labour. For the radical left outside Labour all eyes are on Scotland where Labour is being seriously challenged by forces to its left. The Radical Independence movement will have a conference of over 2500 and the Scottish Socialist party has increased its membership by over 1200. There are calls for a Podemos-type movement there. Recently the Scottish Labour leader resigned criticising Miliband.

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They face losing half their MPs in Scotland according to recent surveys. In the rest of the UK the radical left still suffers from too much division although the Left Unity project initiated by Ken Loach has consolidated 50 branches and nearly 2000 members. It aims to work for further unity of the left.

One urgent issue for the left of Labour is how to challenge Miliband's Labour party at the general election in May. Left Unity is probably only able to put up around a dozen or so candidates. The Trade Union and Socialist Coalition is an electoral bloc without individual membership or local branches but organised through the leaderships of the Socialist Workers Party, the Socialist Party and the railworkers union the RMP. It is aiming to stand 100 candidates, partly in order to qualify for an electoral TV broadcast. In many areas the Greens will be standing with credible candidates with policies well to the left of Labour. Consequently Left Unity members will be supporting varying candidates and campaigns depending on local circumstances. Although current political volatility means the overall vote for smaller parties outside the mainstream will be bigger than ever and may lead to an unclear outcome next May, the undemocratic first past the post electoral system makes it very difficult for alternative parties to be fairly represented. Socialists will be using the elections to get as many votes as possible but also as a basis for reinforcing the anti-austerity fightback and building a more embedded class struggle alternative to Labour's tepid 'social' neo-liberalism.

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