

People's Assembly: our best chance for unity

The People's Assembly, with its trade union backing and its 3,500 registered participants, presents the most serious – and the last – opportunity to unite the anti-cuts struggles within a single, democratic federation of groups and campaigns.

This is no easy task, and it is certainly not the intention of the Assembly's principal organisers and backers. The danger is that it will just be another top-down rally with no follow through.

Seize the day

Excellent though it is to have so many people attending, and inspiring though the handful of preparatory assemblies were, the Assembly's ability to act as a strategic forum is hamstrung by the fact that people are not attending as delegates armed with a mandate to vote on policy, the only way it could be confident of issuing an authoritative call for action.

Nevertheless, there is no more time to organise another Assembly on this scale; we must seize this opportunity with both hands. Against those who say the Assembly does not have the authority to order action we say "then let us appeal, let us organise – get behind us or get out of the way."

This is important because debate without action is futile. Passing resolutions with no desire to act is not only pointless, it's a complete waste of an opportunity.

Fight to win

It is urgent that the People's Assembly recognise both the historic nature of the attack mounted by the Tory and Liberal Democrat government against the welfare

state, and the critical conjuncture 2013 represents in the government's plans. Like Thatcher's attacks on jobs in the nationalised industries, on social housing and on trade union rights, Cameron and Clegg aim not only to destroy the reforms wrought from capitalism by generations of

working people, but to render the trade unions yet more powerless and smash their remaining strongholds in the public sector. We should not be complaining about this ruthless prosecution of class war but replying to it blow for blow. As a political attack by the whole capitalist class, it requires a response by the whole working class – and all its progressive allies – that is both industrial in its main sphere of action and political in its aim.

And this aim can be nothing other than driving this gang of parasites from power. In short it requires a general strike. Defending the National Health Service (NHS) alone against break up and private plundering would justify this in the eyes of millions. Similar vandalism is underway in social housing, comprehensive education, access to higher education, social security benefits, pensions, access to culture and recreation and so on.

We can't repeat mistakes

But so far the response, though it reached a highpoint in 2010-11, has lacked any focused leadership or initiative. Our forces have been divided, both locally and nationally.

The Labour Party leadership has not fought to rally its members against the Tory-Lib Dem offensive. Instead it triangulates

between half-hearted parliamentary criticism and budget cutting and wage freezing policies of its own. To "wait for Labour" in 2015 is to accept in advance a historic defeat on the scale of the 1980s.

The trade unions' policy of "coordinated action", linking separate sectional disputes via single days of action many months apart, has failed miserably. So too has the calling of mass demonstrations with no tomorrow, without a perspective of rapidly escalated and expanded action.

The competing coalitions of campaigns set up by groups to the left of Labour have not found a solution either. These coalitions should unite and dissolve into a common movement at this People's Assembly. Nor have the purely local or sectoral campaigns done so, magnificent as many of their actions have been. They have not yet been able to draw together everyone yearning to save our public services into a single mighty force and unleash it on the wreckers in power.

Democracy in action

The great opportunity of the People's Assembly is to unite the resistance both locally and nationally not just in words but also in deeds. The local people's assemblies attended by hundreds of activists that preceded 22 June are a start in the right direction. They must continue and spread to every town and borough this summer, and be repeated in the autumn to discuss the implementation of the demands. They will however only generate a permanent and growing mass movement if they elect action committees to coordinate democratically, present to the public and

branches, the campaigns, the political and community organisations, and the individuals drawn to them.

We need a national focus for action, and last years Trades Union Congress (TUC) decision – hesitant as it was – indicates what this must be: a general strike accompanied by all manner of direct action to demand an end to the cuts, to unemployment, to wage freezing, and to defend public services, centrally the NHS. The Assembly should demand such a call from the TUC and will organise a demonstration at it to support all the unions calling for this. If the TUC will not respond to this then the People's Assembly should be recalled to plan and call one. Even a one-day action can massively rally huge forces. From its platforms a call for escalating and finally all-out, decisive action can be made. Once real masses are in motion the threats of the courts and the anti-union laws will melt away or successfully be defied, especially if the left union leaders hold their nerve and their members make it impossible for them to betray by imposing democratic controls over them. Mass class-wide action like this could drive this reactionary government from power.

We will therefore be arguing at the People's Assembly that it should declare itself in favour of:

- Uniting the anticuts campaigns nationally and locally
- People's assemblies and committees of action in every town and city
- A general strike and day of mass action on a date to be decided in consultation with the unions supporting the Assembly – escalating to all-out action
- A recalled conference of delegates from the local people's assemblies, trade unions etc, soon after the day of action to plan all-out action

Keep up the pressure

Taken in isolation, this won't be enough to stop the austerity juggernaut. If the People's Assembly is unwilling, or incapable, of adopting the necessary measures, then we will find ourselves at a dead end. If we wait for some indeterminate time in 2014 to agree a plan of action, we will be weaker for the delay, not stronger.

The trade union leaders – whose current capacity for resistance leaves much to be desired – will say "don't rock the boat – wait for Labour". But while union bigwigs with six-

figure salaries can wait for Labour, for tens of millions of working class people it will be far too late.

Between now and Election Day the coalition will go all-out to create austerity's facts on the ground. Whoever wins the election will make those facts permanent.

Whatever the outcome of the People's Assembly, uniting the anti-cuts movement behind a common strategy for resistance will remain the most important task facing the working class, the unemployed and the youth. Creating follow-up assemblies in every town and city will bring the debate to more people. These assemblies should be organised with the open intention of critical discussion that can lead to action.

If these can draw in representatives of the labour movement – rank and file workers, branch reps – if it can draw in the unemployed and the youth, if it reaches out to the thousands resisting the Bedroom Tax and organising to defeat the fascist English Defence League; if we can create these democratic and representative forums, then we will have given ourselves a fighting chance.

Resolution to the People's Assembly

This People's Assembly recognises:

1. The historic nature of the attack mounted by the Tory-Lib Dem coalition against the entire post-1945 welfare state;
2. The months ahead are a critical period for the implementation in the government's plans to slash welfare benefits, jobs and pensions, and to fragment and privatise the NHS and education;
3. Cameron and Clegg also aim to smash the trade union strongholds in the public services;
4. Since this is a political attack on behalf of the capitalist class this requires a massive response by the whole working class and all its allies. This means industrial and direct action culminating a general strike to halt these attacks and drive those conducting them from power;
5. So far the resistance – which reached a highpoint in 2010-11 – has lacked a clear focus. Our forces have been divided, both locally and nationally;
6. Neither the TUC nor the Labour Party has coordinated or led a fightback. A series of competing coalitions against the cuts, set up by parties to the left of Labour, have not found a solution either. Nor have the purely local or the sectoral campaigns – magnificent as their actions have been – proved able to draw together everyone yearning to save our public services.

This Peoples Assembly therefore resolves:

1. To call on the various national anticuts campaigns to permanently unite into one common movement;
2. To call on local anticuts campaigns, where they have not already done so, to hold town, borough or city-wide People's Assemblies and to elect bodies of delegates to ensure solidarity with all sectors under attack and participation in national action;
3. To call on the TUC to make good its pledge and to set as its goal a general strike, accompanied by various forms of direct actions, to demand an end to the cuts, to unemployment, to wage-freezing, and to defend the various services – centrally, the NHS itself;
4. To this end we will organise a demonstration on 8 September in Bournemouth to support the unions calling for action. If the TUC fails to do this we will recall the People's Assembly – this time seeking delegates from the trade unions and local assemblies – to plan how to generate a mass strike and direct actions to gain our objectives.