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Dispatch

Images of Class and Social Change: Working Class Campaigns in Greater Manchester Since the Financial Crash of 2007

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This article and photo story reflects on the campaigns that have emerged from working class communities in Greater Manchester since the financial crisis of 2007. Rather than just focusing on traditional labour movements, the dispatch also includes wider struggles such as housing and public services. In doing so it offers broad insights into how campaigns have emerged and been maintained, the strategies employed, and how they relate to the local working class movement. These insights are delivered through an investigation of the author's archive of his work as a journalist and photographer alongside a series of recent interviews with local activists who have been engaged in this broad range of campaigns during this period.

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Figure 1. Top: Civil Servants on a half day strike at a rally outside Manchester Civil Justice Centre. 5th April 2013. *Bottom:* Residents from Ancoats in Manchester attend a daily vigil outside the Grade 2 listed Ancoats Dispensary that was under threat of demolition by developer, Urban Splash. Their campaign was successful. January 20th 2013.[1]

Introduction

Since the financial crash in 2007 there have been numerous crises affecting working class communities in the UK. Some are a direct result of the financial crash, others a result of political and economic policies that have emerged since. This dispatch will discuss some key resistance campaigns from this

[1] The author holds copyright for all photographs in this Dispatch. Each photograph has previously been published in local or national news media in the UK during the author's career with press agencies and local media organisations.

period and what they have meant for the working-class movements in the region. This will include campaigns that have taken on social justice concerns such as cuts to public services, employments rights, affordable housing and homelessness. The scope of this activism is vast as there have been so many issues for working class people to respond to, including unaffordable housing, cuts to health care, precarious employment, food poverty, etc. There simply isn't the space here to fully explore the range of social justice issues affecting working-class people. For this reason, the article will focus on three specific concerns: work, public services and housing.

Figure 2. An activist at a protest by trade unionists, health workers and people with disabilities against ATOS in Manchester which was part of a national protest in 144 locations across the UK. February 20th 2014.

Work

In *Work and the Working Class Now* (2021), Brian Elliot looks at how attitudes towards the working class in the UK have changed during the neoliberal period, from the demonisation of the working class that is examined in Owen Jones (2012) *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class,* to the increased pressure placed on workers to "enhance their productivity" with no obligation from employers to "safeguard jobs or work conditions" (Elliot, 2021, p. 83). Elliot's (2021) analysis of the changes in the organisation of the work force offers another useful insight. Against the backdrop of deindustrialisation since the 1960s, there has been a significant shift from large, well-organised workforces to smaller, more fragmented workforces typical of the service

sector. Elliot (2021) details the numerous ways this, and the casualisation of employment, has reduced the potential of union organisation. This hasn't happened without a fight though. Over the last 20 years of reporting on these issues, I have seen that there still remains some relationship between larger, more organised workplaces and more fragmented ones, or even with people without union protection who are struggling to find employment. Indeed, strikes still remain workers' most powerful strategy against those who control capital (Lindqvist, 2023). In one example in 2013, Hovis workers from Wigan in Greater Manchester won their strike against Premier Foods through the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union under the slogan "Zero Hours, Zero Crumpets!" (Ensor, 2013). They managed to get rid of zero hours contracts and created 25 permanent jobs. Another campaign was against the *fitness to work* initiative being delivered by the contractor Atos on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) between 2013 and 2015 (Salford Star, 2014b; Syal, 2016; Tilley 2018). This scheme involved Atos conducting *Work Capability Assessments* (WCAs) of disability claimants. Atos was forced to withdraw from its contract with the DWP in 2015 as a result of the campaign, supported by the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union, which was able to draw on years of negative publicity for Atos's conduct and establish links between the actions of Atos and the deaths of several claimants. There has also been a campaign against benefit sanctions led by the Unite union. Unite worked with organisations in Greater Manchester such as Salford Unemployed and Community Resource Centre to support people most vulnerable to the sanctions as they intensified (Salford Star, 2014a). Alongside these, there are numerous other labour rights campaigns supporting issues such as terms and conditions, pay, blacklisting, and health and safety.

In the neoliberal workplace, the rampant individualism that has been engineered during the neoliberal period has been pitted against the collectivism of the union movement. This has happened through attacks on the trade union movement by both left- and right-wing political parties in the UK; these are designed to break working class solidarity. It has also happened through the normalising of liberal individualist ideals that have cruelly dismantled the social fabric of working-class communities. This process has taken shape to undermine notions of collective activity and ownership. It should be no surprise to see its effective deployment, and how it drives an increase in private wealth at the expense of public goods and resources and the transfer of wealth from the commons to private hands. To get at the roots of this shift, there is a need to analyse the working-class movement from a broader perspective, by asking what are the cultural norms of our times and how do they undermine notions of collective identity and social justice?

Figure 3. A member of Disabled People Against the Cuts protests at the Conservative Party Conference. October 5th 2015.

Figure 4. A protester at a defend the right to strike demonstration and rally in Manchester in protest of the Conservative Party's trade union bill. November 7th 2015.

Many people engaged in the contemporary neoliberal workplace do not fit neatly into a working-class identity. The emergence of the "freelance worker"

in various sectors of society has happened through the seduction of being "free" to do their "own work." To "be your own boss" speaks of an autonomy that is sadly elusive for most freelance workers. Far from freeing workers, in the UK the door has been opened for capitalists to create zero-hours contracts through which an employer is not required to offer a minimum number of hours to an employee, or certain benefits that come with more stable contracts. These contracts make people dependent on precarious work for their own survival. Similarly, in certain sectors, the archetypal neoliberal subject, someone engaged in more typically middle-class professions such as arts and media, now find themselves perpetually engaged in "self-improvement," both as consumer and producer. Those in more typically working- class professions find themselves trapped by employers holding power due to their economic control, legislative favours by various governments, and the barriers for unions and other working-class organisations to become established due to the transience of the workforce.

Here, we have two types of work, one which requires constant self-improvement and another which creates barriers for people to learn more skills to increase the value of their labour. For this second group of workers, taking risks with low-paid employment is not a choice with the aim of improving their skills to increase their chances of a better paid job: it is a necessity to meet their own subsistence needs. The first group, to some extent, challenges the Marxist notion of alienation that happens when workers sell their labour to the owners of capital, as they appear to be the owners of their own means of production. Yet this section of the middle class is also locked into a dependency as their small level of capital brings little, if any, income and the only meaningful income they get comes from selling their labour. This makes them less competitive and pressures them to scale up their operations, which in turn completely changes the nature of their work relations. In each context, for most workers their labour is no less commodified and surplus value is still extracted at some point in the transaction. The gain for the neoliberal employer is that collective subjectivities are all but lost through these precarious types of work and competition between workers is promoted. This precarity, I suggest, expands the types of employment that working class campaigns would include, and how we might build a wider solidarity. It is also worth considering that this precarity is not simply about types of employment but is also about services that workers offer to working class communities.

Figure 5. Protesters at the Wall of Noise Demonstration against the Government organised by Disabled People Against the Cuts. October 4th 2017.

Services

Perhaps the most dominant feature in this period is the impact of cuts to public services for working-class communities and the many acts of organised resistance to it. In *The Violence of Austerity* (2017), Cooper and Whyte describe the deprivation of UK politics in the decade following the financial crisis of 2007. The book charts the devastating effects of austerity policies on working class communities and the horrifying impacts on people's financial circumstances, and their mental and physical health. The UK Austerity programme was introduced by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010 and remained until just prior to the 2019 general election. The Conservatives sold austerity as a necessary response to the 2007/08 financial crash. The term was then reintroduced in 2021 in relation to the then Conservative government's response to the "cost of living crisis." Though its stated aim in 2010 was to reduce the government's budget deficit, its true purpose was to restore the rate of profit by assuring the continued transfer of wealth from the commons into the hands of the ruling classes (Albano de Freitas, 2017). The consequences have been widespread and have especially affected the health of the nation's population. Life expectancy has stalled for most people and has in fact fallen for women in poor areas (Marmot et al., 2020). In Greater Manchester, the level of the cuts has been devastating, as one activist interviewed for this dispatch explained:

> The first three years of cuts were brutal. They literally cut the council budget by about a third in those first three years. Between the first three and the next seven or eight we went from 33% to 50%. The councils didn't know what they were doing, all they could see was they [the national government] are going to cut and some of it just didn't make any sense.

His local union branch battled with the local council to protect things like homeless services, adult care, and welfare rights services:

> They wanted to get rid of. What they did to the adult care sector was brutal. This was a bit later on but they were literally shoving people with special needs into taxis to get them to a day centre. It will have cost them millions.

During this period, once a year the council would announce what cuts they would be making for that year, and each time the local public sector workers union, UNISON, would fight them:

> It was real services that had a real impact on service users. It was an honour for the branch to support those people who wanted to fight back. We couldn't have done it without them. And obviously we developed and got more experienced and more confident about how to organise those people to resist as we got more used to being in that position. As a branch we have always supported any resistance to those things [cuts to services], because it makes a real difference. You know it has affected people who are vulnerable, or even worse. The services that are lost to people who have disabilities is shocking. Or if you are homeless or vulnerable in any way.

Figure 6. Protesters demonstration against the Labour run council's decision to close The Grange, a home for disabled children, outside a Youth Day celebration at Eccles Town Hall. September 4th 2013.

The importance of the services that were being cut had for their communities meant that the battles they engaged in were not just for union members, but also for the service users and their communities. According to one activist,

"some of the service users we have met over the years are fantastic fighters for their class, they are not recognised. They probably don't see themselves that way but they have been phenomenal." One such battle was the fight to save The Grange, a home for disabled children with severe and complex needs, as activist engaged in the campaign explained, "these parents, that were caring for children with severe incredible disabilities, were still willing to fight a campaign not just for their own child but for the good of society to try to maintain those services." The campaign kept The Grange open for several years, but sadly it was forced to close in 2018. The options that emerged for children who would have accessed this service has not met their needs, he explained: "they were so right [to resist these cuts], once it was gone, those families were not getting any support." The council closed The Grange completely to save an estimated £300,000 with a plan to move the young people to "expensive out-of-borough residential placements." There were many problems, the activist continued: "loads of safeguarding issues arose because there were adults in there with children and in the end no parent could trust putting their child there."

Figure 7. A protester at the NHS is Not For Sale March at the Conservative Party Conference. October 6th 2015.

During the first period of cuts there were many campaigns to save services. The campaign to save day care centres saw huge support, as the activist recalled:

> I think that was the first time where we put a call out for a public meeting, and it [the community hall] was packed. It was really powerful. We were kind of new, and a little bit high on it in one sense. We staved off them closing.

Other campaigns such as those against cuts to mental health services also had successes. Early in 2012, the local council announced cuts to Mental Health Services that meant fewer staff and less support for service users. In horror at the impacts this would have, service users formed USUC (United Service Users' Committee). They had numerous disputes with the council that ranged from a confrontation with the mayor at a local community "Democracy Day," to occupying and disrupting council meetings. They had so many victories they even published a manual called *Cuts Can Be Beaten* (Salford Star, 2013).

There were many small, publicly funded organisations such as The Grange that provided important support for working class communities, that have now disappeared as a result of cuts. Spaces such as those offered at The Grange were often under public ownership so not only worked for working class communities but were also owned by them. A key question to be answered here is, how do these cuts relate to the maldistribution of resources and transfer of wealth? Cutting them has clearly worked to reduce the tax burden on wealthy individuals and so sees the distribution of resources and wealth move into their hands. It is well documented how the 2008 recession and subsequent bailout of the banks profited the wealthy at the expense of people on lower Incomes. According to Sherman (2019, para. 1), "something that's become clear since the Great Recession is how the 'rescue' orchestrated by central banks channelled a massive wealth transfer from the bottom to the top of the socioeconomic ladder" (Sherman, 2019, para. 1). Taxation of the richest in society continues to fall at the same time that poverty is increasing. The fact that investment income and capital gains have lower tax rates than regular income (Advani et al., 2023) rewards capital over labour; capitalism doesn't prioritise work, it prioritises capital. Along with the suppression of wages since 2008 this has led to an increase of wealth for the richest in society and a decrease in wealth for the poorest. Oxfam recently launched a report on inequality which the showed how "the richest 1% are capturing the wealth the whole world creates […] against this dramatic backdrop of crisis and suffering" (Lawson, 2023, para. 5). According to the Resolution Foundation (2023, para. 1), "15 years of economic stagnation has left workers across Britain with an £11,000 a year lost wages gap." Prior to the financial crisis, German households were £500 per year better off than British households, this has now increased to £4,000. Typical households in the UK are nine percent poorer than their equivalents in France, while low-income households are now 22% poorer (para. 3).

Figure 8. Demolition of Apple Tree Court in Pendleton, Greater Manchester. November 25th 2014.

Housing

One area where unionism in the UK has seen some growth since the 2007 financial crisis is in the formation of tenant's unions such as Acorn, Living Rent, Greater Manchester Tenants Union, and London Renters Union. Indeed, for many, definitions of class are increasingly being shaped by asset ownership (Adkins et al., 2019). So, whilst the need for action and reflection on labour and services still remains vital and is central to a focus on working class campaigns, there is an increased need to spread these further. This is especially so when we consider the impact of the housing crisis in the UK and the increasing percentage of the population that it is affecting.

It is important to remember that the current housing crisis is not a product of the economic crash of 2007/8. If anything, the economic crash was a product of a housing crisis. The ongoing challenge of houselessness has led to a range of housing campaigns opposing the selling of council housing stock, demolitions of existing housing stock, gentrification, the bedroom tax, tenants' rights, homelessness, health and safety: the list goes on. These campaigns tend to be very localised, though there are some national organisations such as the Radical Housing Network that link many of these groups. Housing campaigns also tend to be temporal and connected to small groups of people tied to a specific geographical area.

Both affordable housing and access to council-owned properties have diminished significantly over the last 15 years. This is partly due to a desire

from local councils to increase the number of middle-class homes to increase their tax take, and a reliance, despite the absence of any evidence that this process actually works, on the neoliberal concept that wealth generated by this tax base will trickle down to working class communities through spending and increased income from the taxes they pay.

Figure 9. Activist at the Greater Manchester protest against the Bedroom Tax outside the GMEX Conference Centre. June 26th 2014.

Across Greater Manchester, locally affordable housing has been a victim of planning decisions (Kingston, 2021) that have led to the demolition of affordable housing and its replacement by mostly unaffordable housing. Indeed, local developer, Countryside Properties, stated about its relationship with a local Council that “it was a key aspiration of the Development Agreement to significantly reduce the proportion of affordable housing” (Kingston, 2012, para. 2). Simultaneously, council-owned housing stock has been depleted through transfers to private housing associations, many of which have profit-making subsidiaries. Finally, as well as missing numerous affordable housing targets, developers also managed to evade paying millions in planning fees and other financial obligations to the local authority, taxes that should serve to finance the additional infrastructure needed from the increase in population.

The campaigns to stop the transfer of 8,800 of Salford’s council houses to a Salford-based social housing provider, Salix Homes, was one of the most significant housing battles in Greater Manchester during the period from the financial crisis in 2007. Tenants were balloted over the decision and in the lead up, Salix workers, who had publicly stated they would vote no to this transfer,

visited tenants to persuade them to vote yes. One of the biggest concerns for tenants was that they were going to lose their "secure tenancy" and be put on a less stable "assured tenancy" agreement. After a massive publicity drive, Salix managed to persuade 60% of tenants to vote for the transfer on the promise of refurbishing their homes so they would meet the Decent Homes standard. However, after winning their vote, Salix declared such renovations to be "unaffordable" for the company. Later, residents in one block of flats were informed that Salix had a £1.8 million shortfall in their budget that could only be recovered by building new flats for private sale or rent on top of the block.

Two activists from the campaign that formed against the transfer of housing stock explained how it came together:

> The campaign was to stop the housing sell off. We had a meeting in the Swinton Legion and St George's Centre [a community hall]. When they got rid of the houses, they [the local council] were like 'we no longer have anything to do with that now.'

This opened an opportunity for the company to start using the property to make profits:

> Not much longer after, Salix started saying, 'we are going to develop flats and premises that are more on the luxury side of the market.' In other words, they will build £500,000 houses on an estate somewhere and you might get three or four of them on the outskirts of the estate for social rent.

According to the activists I spoke with, the main motivation of those involved in the campaign was to prevent the transfer of council houses to private landlords and stop displacement: "our aim was to stop it point blank, to keep housing under local authority control, build council housing, use the revenue and borrow to build more." The campaigners also focused on accountability, stating how, when the council housing management boards were appointed prior to the transfer, there were councillors on them. With the new landlord they are now gone, so there is no accountability through the local authority:

> They can just do what they want. They [tenants] lost the security of tenure. That is what they lost. They had certain rights that were bound by the local authority, statutory regulations, that has all gone. Health and safety, all gone.

Figure 10. Left: A protester at a demonstration against the first bedroom tax eviction in Greater Manchester. April 10th 2014. *Right:* A sign outside a homeless camp under the threat of eviction by landowner Manchester Metropolitan University and Manchester City Council. September 22nd 2015.

This lack of accountability made it difficult for residents to challenge some of the practices of companies like Salix. One activist, through her role with the campaigning charity Shelter, spoke about how this affected a tenant she had been working with:

> They said they were going to help him move out, but turned up one day and told him he was moving out there and then. It was all done in the name of regeneration by the new housing company, who just wanted him out.

The pressure this puts on people is immense and the disruption it causes has a long-term impact. “They don’t give any support for people in rented accommodation,” she explained. “He just wanted more support. You know, like someone coming round to see if he needed any help, or go to the shops during the pandemic.” Displaced, they are left in accommodation where they will rarely know anyone, leading to significant increases in social isolation and loneliness with little, if any, opportunity for experiences of solidarity. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2024) states that this is having serious

impacts on both physical and mental health, as well as the well-being of communities and society.[2]

Another housing campaign during this period was against the Under-occupancy Penalty or Bedroom Tax, as it came to be known. This was introduced in 2013 as an outcome of the British Welfare Reform Act 2012 and was aimed at tenants in social housing. The policy meant that those with bedrooms that were deemed "spare" faced a reduction in their housing benefit. The result for many was that they had to finance the shortfall in their benefits, which often led to people falling into rent arrears and potentially facing eviction. Campaigners also pointed out that the lack of affordable and social rent accommodation made it particularly difficult for tenants to downsize. Even if they wanted to give up a home with extra space in it, they could not, as they had nowhere else to go owing to the lack of affordable homes. Numerous campaign groups were set up around the country to challenge the Bedroom Tax, such as the Greater Manchester Anti Bedroom Tax Federation which lobbied to have the policy overturned. In March 2014, as a result of this national campaign against the Bedroom Tax, the United Nations recommended its "immediate suspension." This recommendation was ignored and in 2016 the penalty was extended to include pensioners. In 2019, the European Court of Human Rights ruled the bedroom tax to be discriminatory and incompatible with Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

As mentioned above, another, less visible, impact of the housing crisis has been the effect of regeneration on the social infrastructure of working-class communities. In challenging this impact, the campaign by the River Island Tenants Association (RITA) in Lower Broughton against the Labour governments Pathfinder scheme which, at the time, was funding the demolition of affordable homes across the country, was a significant success. The group had discovered plans by the local council's chosen developer for the regeneration of the area that would have seen duck ponds and bistros built where their houses stood. They called a public meeting attended by around 400 people, and whilst other communities gave up in their battles to save their homes, in 2008 RITA forced the council to change policy, preventing the demolition of their homes and instead achieving their renovation and ensuring that they remained standing and affordable.

[2] The WHO Commission on Social Connection proposes a global agenda on social connection and makes the case for action on addressing these issues.

Figure 11. Members of the Riverside Island Tenants Association celebrate their victory against the demolition of their homes. May 20th 2008.

One of the most distressing aspects of the housing crisis is how it has caused a significant rise in homelessness. Between 2010 and 2015 Manchester saw a tenfold increase in street homelessness. This sharp rise led to a number of protests from both unhoused people and the wider public. These culminated with the "Homeless Action March" in April 2015 against austerity and the lack of action on homelessness. One outcome of the March was the formation of a homeless camp on public land outside Manchester Town Hall: but Manchester City Council (MCC) quickly gained a possession order to evict the camp while evading its duty of care to re-house those in it.

Residents of the camp moved their tents to another area of public land in the City Centre, which led to another possession order and threat of eviction by MCC. Again, they moved their camp and again were met with a possession order. This process continued until July 2015 when MCC brought a full stop to it by gaining an injunction at Manchester Civil Justice Centre preventing anyone from setting up a camp on public land anywhere else in the City Centre. The defeat of the protest was guaranteed when the Legal Aid Agency announced its refusal to provide legal support to the camp residents the day before their case was due to be heard in court, on the grounds that it did not satisfy the merits test for public funding (Speed, 2017).

Figure 12. Legal Aid protest outside Manchester Magistrates Court. January 5th 2013.

The Legal Aid Agency's action, too, was a direct result of austerity budgeting. As part of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government's austerity measures, £350 million a year had been cut from its legal aid budget, which meant that residents of these camps, already victims of austerity through cuts to the welfare system, high unemployment and unaffordable housing, now also became victims of austerity cuts to legal aid. Nowhere can the assault on social justice and the suffering caused by austerity be more tangible than in this cycle: high unemployment, a depleted welfare system and unaffordable housing forced many young people in Manchester to live on the streets. The camps they built so they could help one another and feel safe were opposed and torn down, and when they looked to the courts for justice, they were not afforded legal aid due to further cuts.

After being forced out of their camps, homeless activists took to squatting empty buildings across Manchester City Centre to provide shelter for themselves and other homeless people. Many properties in the city centre are left empty for years as investors engage in a practice similar to land banking. This is to some extent a by-product of the financialisaton of the housing market as inflation in the market brings in higher yields than rental income, so investors control the supply of property to the market to keep demand high. Some of the buildings that were squatted included properties owned by supposedly ethical investors such as the Co-op and the Greater Manchester Pensions Fund (GMPF), on whose advisory boards local politicians sit. At one point, 30 homeless people were evicted from an empty pizza restaurant owned by GMPF despite the presence of these local politicians, whose role is to safeguard and advocate for citizens.

Figure 13. Homeless people and local activists celebrate winning an appeal against their eviction from an empty building that once housed a pizza restaurant, owned by Greater Manchester Pension Fund. November 23rd 2016.

Conclusions

Having reported on these issues over the last 15 to 20 years, I have seen how the challenges around work, public services and housing have provoked numerous campaigns from working class communities in Greater Manchester. For those priced out of home ownership, rentiers control housing supply chains with the same net result as the loss of social housing. People are now spending far more of their income on housing (Office for National Statistics, 2022), a challenge that has become so pronounced it is now a key characteristic of working-class experience. Unaffordable housing, the dismantling of the welfare system, and the failure of many jobs to provide a subsistence wage has forced more people into precarious housing or outright homelessness. It has also led to a significant rise in food poverty and a subsequent demand for food banks and food redistribution charities. How various campaigns responding to these issues are joined up is becoming more significant to more people, and the ability of local working-class movements to bring them together is crucial for addressing these conditions at their root cause. There were ongoing and growing signs of resistance to the last government's efforts to transfer wealth to the rich but how this will evolve with the new Labour government is yet to be seen. However, given they have already said they will adopt the same developer led, trickle-down ideology they adopted when they last took power in 1997, the signs are not good (Monbiot, 2025; King, 2025). The mistakes they made on this issue the last time they were in power contributed to the current problems with affordable housing and are a significant reason for the current housing crisis. That Labour are intending on the same actions again is

truly shocking. Developers will always work for profits, no matter how well-intentioned they may or may not be. From my experience of reporting on this crisis for over the last 15 to 20 years, this profiteering is one of the most significant reasons large parts of working-class communities have lost trust in government. If they want to win that trust back, access to quality affordable housing is surely a good place to start. Debates about how communities organise are crucial in holding the new government to account. Unfortunately, however, housing is an issue that does not share the same organising infrastructure that work does.

In this dispatch, I explored working-class campaigns in Greater Manchester since 2007 through three key strands: responses to precarious work, diminished public services, and unaffordable housing. The damage of socially unjust austerity politics for working-class communities and the inequalities it causes are what most campaigns have opposed, and organising has offered a sense of direction for the local working-class movement. In the end, however, whilst there have been significant levels of mobilisation and some impressive innovations in campaigns that oppose the evisceration of working-class life, more has been lost than won.

Figure 14. Over 100,000 people demonstrate against the Conservative Government during their annual conference. October 4th 2015.

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