

## **March for the Alternative London, 26 March 2011**

Bernard and I decided to go on the TUC march against the cuts. We were both apprehensive, and relieved to be going together. We travelled by tube from Walthamstow. Most of the people in our carriage seemed to be going to the march; some, like us, got off at Charing Cross while others carried on, presumably to Embankment. There were a few people with placards milling around in Trafalgar Square. We took advantage of the palatial conveniences there and then set off up the Strand, turning down to the Embankment just before Waterloo Bridge. The publicity had said that the march would form up on the Embankment between Blackfriars and Waterloo bridges—an over-simplification.

There was a line about eight or ten abreast facing towards Westminster and stretching as far as we could see in both directions. We walked towards the front and just before 10.30 we found a place beside Cleopatra's Needle in a second line that was forming to the right of the first. We couldn't tell how far we were from the front. We were soon boxed in as more people arrived. It was almost twelve o'clock when we moved off, and all the time the crowd around us became denser. A third line formed up on our right, so that the march when we all set off was some thirty abreast. This third stream always seemed to be moving more quickly than the rest of us. We could see people moving along the South Bank and crossing Waterloo Bridge and there was also a line crossing Westminster Bridge, including a huge figure of a horse. It made me think of the Trojan Horse rather than the TUC carthorse. The merging of the Westminster Bridge marchers with those of us coming from the Embankment caused delays and we took from 12.30 to one o'clock to move past Big Ben. I guess there were similar delays behind us as those on Waterloo Bridge fed into the main march. The pace picked up at the foot of Whitehall. The horse was just in front of us and I saw that it was labeled 'Armed wing of the TUC' or something like that. It was made of what looked like sacking over a giant frame; I couldn't see how many people were required to carry it. They were lucky it was not windy. There were smaller figures in attendance representing what I took to be two of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. We passed the well guarded entrance to Downing Street at 1.15, but the pace then slowed and we were still in Whitehall half an hour later when it came on to spit with rain. Once we had negotiated Trafalgar Square the speed picked up along Regent Street, and into Piccadilly. By this time I had lost sight of the horse. About 2.15, as we were going at a good rate towards the Park, Bernard and I left the march and went back to Charing Cross to meet Jessy, Jules and Mo, as we were all due to go down the Arthur's birthday party in Brockley.

We started off surrounded by people from the GMB, many in orange t-shirts, and although we were soon separated from them, as the march proceeded we kept coming back in contact. Many of the marchers were equipped with very loud horns, I think the same sort as were used in South Africa during the world cup. There was a constant tooting all around us, and every so often they would all go off together. It wasn't easy to see what prompted these sudden outbursts, except that they sometimes coincided with a helicopter flying overhead. There were also whistles of one sort and another, and a very good Indian drummer who was quite close to us while we were waiting, and passed close to us now and then as we marched. Later we found ourselves briefly alongside a group from the Royal College of Midwives, who didn't have horns to blow and were less noisy than the GMB people. Later again we were close to a group calling themselves Women against Rape who chanted a lot of slogans. 'Welfare not warfare,' was one that I remember, but others were less obviously connected with the cuts. I guess their reason for being there was that their activities up and down the country are dependent on funding from local authorities. There were other slogan shouters. One particularly annoying lad was marching beside us at first. He had a megaphone which

he pointed up into the sky as he read a slogan off a sheet, and those around him would shout out the correct response. I guess they were Trotskyites. I tried to commit some of their *pensées* to memory, but have forgotten them all. There were all sorts of left wing groups, including women from Greenham Common, opponents of the action against Libya and a group calling themselves Bolsheviks whose propaganda sheet (austerely monochrome and closely printed) bore the portraits of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. It has been widely said of the marchers that they had no alternative to offer to the cuts, and I think that in a sense this is a legitimate criticism of most of us, but there was one man who was handing out a long document in small type that promised a detailed alternative policy.

So who were the marchers? There was the usual cocktail of fringe groups that turn up on any march, but from press reports as well as my own observation and the photographs on the web it's clear that the majority were public sector workers, many of them marching behind their beautifully made union banners. Commentators have made much of this, pointing out that these workers had a vested interest in opposing the cuts in order to safeguard their jobs, and like most cheap gibes this has some basis in truth, but it doesn't mean these marchers were merely defending their own interests. For one thing, given the size of the turn-out, it is likely that a good proportion of the marchers were reasonably secure in their own jobs, and were protesting out of solidarity with vulnerable colleagues. It is hard to know what motivates people, but this doesn't mean we should fall back on the easy view that everyone is motivated by their own interests. 'Sectional interests' is often used in a pejorative sense, but in fact a care for our own section of society, the people and problems that we know about, can be as altruistic as a care for humanity at large. Some would argue that it is the most authentic form of collective solidarity. There is a widespread assumption that people who work in the public sector do so because they can't get a 'proper' or 'productive' job in industry or finance, but this is seldom the case. It's a choice people make because they want to contribute to the good of the community, or because they want to help people – and to do it without pressure to turn a profit for themselves or their employers. Obviously teaching, nursing and social work are jobs; people do them for a salary, and are interested in their careers, but they also professionally and personally concerned for the users of their services, and aware of the impact of the cuts.

Although public sector workers were almost certainly in the majority on the march, there were also voluntary groups whose work is dependent on public funds, and groups representing those who use public services. And undoubtedly there were many, like Bernard and me, who bore no badge and whose allegiance was impossible to guess, but who were opposed to the cuts for their own reasons.

Bernard and I had both hoped that the march would give us an opportunity for conversation – for a further episode in our life-long conversation – but the noise made it impossible. It also made it hard to overhear what other people were saying, which for me is one of the few pleasures to be gained from crowds. During a lull in the hooting I did hear a man behind me droning on about the alternative vote, and then giving a detailed blueprint for reform of the second chamber. Finally he and his companion went on to discuss caravanning, and I heard him say, 'Ah, you have to go to Glossop for that. Glossop is the place for that.' Something else I overheard was a sign of the times. There was a placard with the slogan 'It's the end, Nye' and someone asked what it meant and had to be told who Nye Bevan was.

We saw a number of mostly young people from Liberty with high-visibility tabards labelled 'Legal Observer'. This reminded me that NCCL observers had been present at large demonstrations at least since the thirties. I don't know whether they identified themselves then so plainly, but I guess during the hunger marches they must have stood out as more prosperous-looking and better nourished than the marchers. On the respectable main march

there was, so far as I saw, no police action for Liberty to complain of – in fact no action at all. The most sinister thing I saw, and it was only out of the corner of my eye, and I probably misunderstood it completely, was as we were going along Piccadilly, just before Bernard and I defected. A couple of very tough looking men were mingling with the crowd with a bucket labeled 'Forces Charity'. My first thought was that they were intent on challenging the marchers to contribute to their rather vaguely defined charity, with the intention of using any hesitation to do so as an excuse for a quarrel. However, all I saw was the two men sloping off, and I've not heard that any such trouble occurred, so I guess I misinterpreted what I saw.

As we were walking towards the assembly point we saw people, plainly heading for the march, asking directions from police officers. We didn't see much police presence on the Embankment (there wasn't much room for them). There were march marshalls directing us as we merged with those coming from Westminster Bridge. At Parliament Square, however, there was a large body of police. Bernard commented that they looked a pretty tough and rough lot, but although I wouldn't be surprised if there were a good many rugby players among them (presumably chosen for that reason) they didn't strike me as particularly threatening or hostile. What struck me most forcibly was that they didn't look much like my idea of policemen. Now that almost everyone wears high-visibility clothing they looked like any outdoor group of council employees (reminding us that they perhaps had reason to sympathise with the marchers) or indeed private security people, bus station attendants or what have you. They were lounging about, leaning on the barricades, chatting amongst themselves, staring at the marchers. Perhaps because they were not wearing a distinctive uniform I couldn't help noticing the wide variety of facial appearance, including some beards, and some wearing spectacles. And although they looked tough, they weren't particularly big men – they were mainly men. How different, I thought, from the policeman in *Bleak House*, who stood out from those around him by virtue of his size and his uniform which together gave him an air of massive impregnability. There was another concentration of police officers outside Downing Street, and again at the top of Whitehall, but at no point did I see them doing anything. When we left the march we cut down past the Athenaeum to the Mall and then crossed the line of the march at the top of Whitehall in order to get to Charing Cross. Although I'd assume the police were by then alerted to the fact that potential trouble-makers were leaving the march and slipping into Trafalgar Square, there was no attempt to stop people doing what we were doing. Of course, Bernard having put down his placard, we now looked like ordinary passers by, middle-aged tourists. The streets off Piccadilly with their expensive houses and clubs were almost deserted, with just a handful of tourists. One house was guarded by a lone policeman, but I don't know why. In one empty street we saw a group of policemen talking and laughing with a man in a black jersey and black woollen hat, whom I at first thought to be a marcher, but I daresay he was actually a plain-clothes man dressed to look like a marcher.

In Whitehall we found ourselves caught up behind a group of bright and, I thought, interesting-looking young people, Art School students, I guessed. They were pushing a bicycle with a make-shift cart in tow. The contents of the cart included placards and some food, but there was a lot more that we couldn't see. The girl who appeared to be in charge was offering people oranges. She wore a scarf covering the lower half of her face, but didn't seem particularly careful to keep it in place. She was carrying what looked like a speaker box on her back. Two of their placards referred to someone called, I think, Boesky ('Fuck Boesky,' one of them said). The only Boesky I can find through Google is Ivan Boesky, a financial fraudster from the 1980s; I can't see why they should be particularly thinking of him, so perhaps I've misremembered the name. This was our first intimation that something odd was planned. As we worked our way slowly up Whitehall an elderly man walked through the crowd saying quietly, but repeatedly, and with a view to being heard, that something was due

to start at ten past two. At the same time we saw someone holding up a cardboard placard urging people to go to Oxford Street, rather than to the Park to listen to Ed.

Predictably, as we passed Downing Street there was a crescendo of hooting and shouting and blowing of horns, but nothing else. When I sent Jessy a text saying where we were, she replied that she hoped we were not involved in the 'incident' at Downing Street. I didn't know what she had in mind, but there were evidently rumours of trouble going around amongst the marchers. We heard later that the 'Greeks' who were concealed within the Horse had mounted some sort of attack on the barriers at the entrance to Downing Street. As Trafalgar Square came in sight we saw that something was going on. People with placards were perched on the lions and standing on the base of the column. A large hammer and sickle was flying. This was the explanation of some signs we had seen saying 'Tahrir Square, S.W.1' and some chants and placards about 'régime change'. This attempt to invoke the Egyptian revolution and compare our grievances and our struggle, such as it is, with with what is going on in Arab and North African countries, seems pretty tasteless and absurd.

It was only later that we heard about the action in Oxford Street. A woman we spoke to on Charing Cross station (a UCU member from Middlesex University) was looking at the news on her phone and told us about the occupation of shops. When we got home and saw the news coverage my first reaction was irritation that the so-called violence was likely to detract from the impact of the main march. I can see why the leaders had to condemn it, but I felt the language was exaggerated. I thought of the young people we had seen with their cart. Foolish, over-excited, reckless – they were all these things, and perhaps criminals too since they caused criminal damage, but they were certainly not mindless thugs. Without agreeing with it I find their action more attractive than the occupation of Trafalgar Square, and I can't help thinking that in attacking businesses (The Ritz and Fortnum & Masons) owned by the rich and catering for the rich they were hitting some of the right targets. And while their direct action was pretty futile, I am sure they would turn the accusation against the main march. Was it, they might ask, anything more than a futile gesture against an entrenched government that has four more years of making cuts ahead of it?

What was the point of the march? We were not expecting to push the government into a sudden conversion, and the marchers certainly didn't have an agreed and coherent alternative policy. What I heard of Ed Miliband's speech to the Hyde Park rally was very feeble, and his inflated rhetorical invocation of great campaigns of the past from women's suffrage to civil rights put him almost on a par with those occupying Trafalgar Square in the name of régime change. To see the point of the march you have to think what it would have meant if there had been no protest from the people whose jobs and services are menaced. It would have told the government that they had got away with their dishonest claim that there was no alternative to these cuts. And for Bernard and me the reason for going along was that if there was a march it had to be a big one; fifty thousand would not have been enough. We were proving that the public sector and its supporters are still a substantial force in the land, substantial in numbers and reaching into every corner of our national life. It's often tempting, as one travels around, to think of society as divided into two, the rowdy, slobbish and excluded on the one hand, and the rich and stylish on the other. The marchers fall into neither of these groups. We are decent, caring people, thinking for ourselves, often unfashionable to the point of eccentricity, often bores, like the man from Glossop, not particularly ascetic, but not obsessed with money and success, more interested in doing a useful job and then enjoying our bit of leisure time in our own way. Marches and demonstrations are usually expressions of marginal opinion, but this march spoke for a significant section of society – perhaps not a majority, because the government propaganda about the inevitability of the cuts has been pretty successful, but certainly a minority that is large enough not to be ignored.