

Disabled People in UK Lead Fight Against Austerity

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On July 20, I was truly honoured to represent the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) at the [International Deaf and Disabled People's Solidarity Summit](#), in Stratford, east London that had been convened by one of our key allies in the UK, Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC). This powerful gathering was an important moment in the building of a resistance by disabled people as part of a broader international struggle against the forces of neoliberal austerity.

The Summit was called as a fitting response to an act of unbridled hypocrisy by the Tory Government of Theresa May. Two days later the Tories would be convening a “global disability summit” on the nearby Olympic Park site. This was a shameless attempt to pose as an international champion of disability rights, especially in poor and oppressed countries, when the Tory track record at home is one of abuse and outright abandonment of disabled people. The appalling legacy of death and despair that has been left through the implementation of the Work Capability Assessment, used to deny social benefits to disabled people living in poverty has become an international scandal. In 2016, the UN’s committee on the rights of persons with disabilities (CRPD) [found the UK Tories to be guilty](#) of “grave or systematic” violations of the international agreements it had entered into.

Solidarity Summit

With the determination and tactical skills we have come to expect of DPAC, the response to this exercise in duplicity was to bring together UK and international allies in a rival summit and to mobilize to confront the Tories at the official gathering. Held in the London Borough of Newham, the DPAC summit was addressed and welcomed by the Labour Party Mayor, Rokhsana Fiaz. Greetings were also brought by Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, who called out the Tories on their brutality and spoke of a Corbyn led Labour Government that would work with disabled people’s organizations to develop policies that challenged poverty and social exclusion.



A range of UK based groups addressed the struggles of disabled people against Tory austerity and a series of international delegates brought greetings to the summit. Feliza Ali Ramos and Alex Marcelo Vazquez Bracamonte, from New Hope in Bolivia, both wheelchair users, gave an astounding account of the struggles they had been part of. Two years ago, they were part of a trek of three hundred miles through the Andes by disabled people to place before the Government in La Paz the demand for a disability pension. Six of them died during this action and they faced riot cops with clubs and water cannons. Some of their demands were met but the fight for a pension continues.

Antonios Rellas, from Zero Tolerance in Greece, also a wheelchair user, told the summit how he took the stand in the trial of the Golden Dawn fascists and exposed how their ideology of hate had been directed against disabled people. He also gave an update on the challenge to the appalling conditions faced by disabled children in state run institutions and the important victories that have been won in this campaign.

Naziaty Yaacob, from Harapan OKU (Hope for Persons with Disabilities) in Malaysia brought greetings via Skype and an account of the struggle against systemic discrimination against disabled people. Rose Achayo, from the National Union of Women with Disabilities of Uganda, gave a powerful account of the fight for dignity and rights in her country and described conditions of abandonment and neglect, faced by disabled women and girls, that shocked the entire gathering. For OCAP, I was able to share struggles against austerity that have been taken up here (in Ontario) and to highlight the pivotal moment we are at with the taking of power by hard right Doug Ford Government. I also, expressed solidarity with the challenge to the UK Tories and pointed out that the legacy of Empire and present international role of Britain, made the May Government's attempt to pose as a benefactor of disabled people in oppressed countries utterly disgraceful - "Truly, the sun never sets on their hypocrisy."

UK Government Challenged

Two days, later our Bolivian comrades led us in a chant of "El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido," as we arrived at the entrance to the official summit. Over the objections of the Olympic Park security officials, who insisted we were 'not in the designated protest area,' we rallied outside and speaker after speaker called out the May Government on its shameful record and its sickening hypocrisy. It was also a festive and cultural event, with some inspiring songs and poetry drawing on the spirit of resistance. Challenged in this way, with

[DPAC's charges](#) being echoed inside the official gathering, international development secretary, Penny Mordaunt, was forced to back away from the arrogant and false claim that the UK is a 'global leader in disability rights'.

The DPAC summit took forward international solidarity and the struggle in the UK. It is as interesting as it is inspiring that an organization of disabled people plays such a leading role in the fight against austerity. Those who the Tories likely viewed as their most powerless victims have given a lead to the whole movement. It drives home the fact that we must build common fronts of resistance that defend past gains but leave no one behind.

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