

Thatcher's Funeral: Celebrating Neoliberalism, Dead-End Journey of the British Working Class

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Next Wednesday, Margaret Thatcher's funeral procession will wind its way through the streets of central London. Although Thatcher has not been accorded an official 'state funeral', it's the next best thing. The ceremonial funeral for Thatcher in St Paul's Cathedral will be backed by a huge display of police and armed forces, who will line the route. The coffin will be carried on a gun carriage drawn by six horses. Guns will be fired at one-minute intervals near the Tower of London.

The mourning of a life passed, the celebration of a life lived. And, if you believe in such things, a send off to the next world or life... or something like that. But what is Britain (or, more aptly, the Establishment) actually remembering or celebrating here?

The Establishment's celebration of Thatcher

Apparently, Margaret Thatcher is to be admired because she was a strong leader, a woman of conviction, the first woman who made it to the top of the political ladder and a woman who made Britain 'great' once more by retaking the Falklands, standing up to the USSR and fighting for British interests in Europe. For many, Thatcher was the embodiment of strength and principle, and that is why she is a 'divisive' figure. Even her divisiveness was due to her perceived 'virtues'.

Apart from media images of some people celebrating the fact she is dead and a few interviews with former miners or miners' wives who endured the full force of Thatcherism in the 1980s, the mainstream media has gone out of its way to portray Thatcher in a positive light over the past week.

The special recall parliamentary session portrayed Thatcher as a great national figure. Some 100 Labour MPs stayed away as Millionaire PM David Cameron declared that "she made this country great again." Cow-towing to the Establishment, Labour leader Ed Miliband, the son of the Marxist academic Ralph Miliband, described Thatcher as "a great and towering figure."

Such sycophantic drooling has become par for the course for Labour leaders, however, as both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown admired Thatcher and adopted her policies without question. And as out of touch with ordinary sentiment as ever, Tony Blair said the celebrations of Thatcher's death "in pretty poor taste" and told people to "show some respect."

But is it any surprise that there is no respect from Thatcher's victims, many of whom she described as the "enemy within"? These were ordinary folk who belonged to trade unions and fought tooth and nail to protect their livelihoods and communities from the devastating

effects of Thatcher's policies.

In the real world, in the country that exists beyond the gentlemen's clubs, the boardrooms, the Blairesque world of highly paid consultancies, the corridors of power in Whitehall and Westminster, the self enclosed world of the Oxbridge dominated BBC, the comfy chat shows and the steel and glass towers of London's finance sector, others have been strident in their condemnation of Thatcher.

Beyond the eulogies

As reported by the Morning Star newspaper, Labour MP Jeremy Corbyn declared that the coverage of Thatcher's death by most of the media was "beyond absurd." Another Labour MP David Winnick recalled that Thatcher's "highly damaging" policies "caused immense pain and suffering to ordinary people."

MP Ian Lavery stated: "I feel very personally about what Thatcher did to my family, my friends and my colleagues, not to mention the people I represent in Parliament."

Mick Appleyard, a miner and elected National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) official in Yorkshire mining village whose economy was totally dependent on the pit, stated that Thatcher "killed my village," which is now "a low-wage, menial wage economy for those who are lucky enough to find jobs." He says there's nothing for young people: they turn to drugs and drink because there's nothing else.

And NUM general secretary Chris Kitchen says that she will never be forgiven for the disaster she inflicted on the mining industry, on our communities, and on the miners.

But such views and impacts are not unique to England's former mining communities.

Under Thatcher, my hometown of Liverpool lost much of its industry and it lost it quickly. Unemployment skyrocketed and people were forced to claim welfare. But they had to 'prove' they were 'looking for work' in order to get their unemployment benefits. Looking for work that no longer existed. The futility of Thatcherism.

In this respect, Liverpool was certainly not unique.

In the 1960s, the city had undergone a slum clearance programme and had shifted whole neighbourhoods to newly built towns and housing projects beyond the city boundaries. There were already huge tracts of land lying empty as a result. With factories closing down in the 80s, even more land was freed up. Part of this land has now been covered with low density housing and trendy part empty debt-bubble apartment blocks, but large areas have been grassed over and 'landscaped' – the trendy euphemism for windswept urban wasteland.

Today, unemployment remains high and people are still being disciplined to look for jobs that have either long disappeared over the horizon or are now being 'trimmed' even more under the lie of 'austerity'. It mirrors the lie that says we must mortgage the present for a better tomorrow that will never come and hammered home with the time-work discipline mentality of the Industrial Revolution. The devil finds work for idle hands, you know – but not for the idle rich of course. Thatcher and her ministers were always keen on harking back to the virtues of 'good old' Victorian values.

And this is Thatcherism's real legacy.

It continues today and is being perpetuated by the current Cameron government. As if things couldn't get much worse for those thrown on the scrapheap as their jobs were scrapped due to outsourcing and automation under the lie of 'efficiency' but the reality of profiteering, just about every aspect of the 'me-first' culture of individualism (Thatcher said that there was no such thing as 'society') now encourages the individual to indulge in an acquisitive materialism whose message is relentless. The thinking is that 'you' – the unemployed, the working classes, the great, great grandchildren of the cannon-fodder 'heroes' sacrificed en masse by the British Establishment on the blood-soaked battlefields of countless imperialist wars – must aspire to live like a multi-millionaire footballer, even though you never will or can because we threw you overboard years ago. This was never intended by to be a 'land fit for heroes' of the working class variety (or for their offspring).

In many of those urban wastelands of England's 'green and pleasant land', what we are left with are jobless people who, as Thatcher once encouraged us all to be, became good free market entrepreneurs by turning to the illegal drugs economy to make a living from supplying their wares to dull the misery of the masses. Heroin very conveniently flooded the streets in the 1980s, the whisper is courtesy of our 'spymaster' saviours.

The outlook is bleak. Many young people in these areas now growing up won't have a job, a job of any meaningful form at least. They will be following in the footsteps of their fathers who did not have a job and their fathers who also had no job. Like their fathers, they too will be stigmatised due to no fault of their own. And yet the moribund system's mantra of endless growth based on consumerism and the need to engage in meaningless forms of work that the system demands necessary remains the Holy Grail, which is implicit within every mind-warp commercial, every politician's cynical utterance and every highly-paid mainstream media political commentator's solution for saving the nation.

It is implicit in every innuendo, condemnation and insinuation directed towards a person who does not have a job or does not display the appropriate trappings of conspicuous consumption. To be called a 'chav' in Britain is to bear the brunt of such a tirade of negative evaluation. Chav represents a media-fuelled demonisation of sections of the working class who were three decades ago sacrificed on the altar of Margaret Thatcher's treachery. The ridiculing of the 'undeserving poor' that since Victorian times have hurt the unscrupulous, hypocritical sensibilities of England's middle and upper classes who have led and supported more unimaginable butchery on the global battlefields of Empire than any number of working class people who have fallen foul of 'Middle England's' sanctimonious bleatings about decency and morality.

What is really being celebrated?

What is really being celebrated when especially Establishment figures eulogise about Thatcher is the destruction of organised labour and the capacity of ordinary people to challenge the hegemony of the elite interests that Thatcher served so well.

Thatcherism wasn't about making the economy efficient and putting an end to supposedly inefficient sectors like coal and steel. Today taxpayers subsidies are lavished on the armaments industry, on the private sector in general via grants from the Department of Trade and Industry (the corporate dole office), via supplementing low paid workers' wages whose employers rake in billions of pounds worth of profits and elsewhere throughout the

economy, not least of course the big banks. But this is not to be discussed – much easier to point the finger at benefit claimants at the bottom of the heap. Much easier to hark back to inefficient industries that conveniently required a good old dose of union busting.

The Morning Star, Britain's only genuine left wing daily newspaper, provided a realistic assessment of Thatcher's legacy by saying that she represented big business and the rich, despite pitching her propaganda at small businesses and aspiring working people. She equated home ownership with having capital and therefore being a capitalist and projected profits-guaranteed sell-offs of utilities as creating a "share-owning democracy."

The paper goes on to place the Thatcher 'housing revolution' into context too by stating that for the nearly two million people who bought their council houses at knockdown prices, this was, for most of them, a great deal as rising house prices left them cash-rich.

But the downside of right-to-buy and refusal to build new council homes to rent has left five million people rotting on council waiting lists or forced into the eager arms of greedy private landlords.

As for Thatcher's much vaunted share-owning democracy, the Morning Star is also unequivocal by arguing that, although the fire sales of utilities and demutualisation of building societies quadrupled the number of people holding shares, the total continues to decline as small shareholders sell up or hold a stake in a single company. Moreover, the newspaper states, the traditional financial elite concentrates its grip on share ownership and the benefits of speculation, while the working class suffers ever-rising charges imposed by the privatised sector.

It concludes its evaluation of the Thatcher legacy by saying that her legacy is too bitter to warrant a claim to national mourning.

"The Thatcher governments inflicted enormous damage on the fabric of British society. Many working-class communities were torn apart by mass unemployment, poverty, drugs and alcohol abuse as the result of Tory policies. She and her regime waged war against organised labour at home, privatised valuable utilities, locked Britain into the European Union and revived the readiness to engage in imperialist wars abroad." Communist Party general secretary Robert Griffiths in 'The woman who tore Britain apart', 8th April, Morning Star.

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