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Britain

Stuff the Jubilee

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This weekend there is a special four-week holiday week-end throughout the United Kingdom to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the current queen's accession to the throne - the Platinum Jubilee. Dave Kellaway of Anti*Capitalist Resistance looks at the ideological system behind the Jubilee jamboree.

We make sense of our lives through the stories we tell ourselves and each other. The dominant ideology functions through the way it occupies or frames those stories. Since we live in an unequal society driven by a system of capitalist exploitation causing class struggle, this occupation and framing are never watertight, never 100 per cent effective. As Leonard Cohen says, there is a crack, a crack in everything, that's where the light gets in. We may despair at the mass immersion in the Jubilee events but there is a growing minority, particularly of young people, who understand the toxic nature of this institution. Wall to wall promotion and coverage of the Jubilee gives no voice to the significant minority who are against the monarchy.

The British monarchy is a national story that is an important cog in the current ideological system. Elizabeth Windsor's 70th Jubilee, which has been promoted for some time by the mass media and is "celebrated" this week in a series of local and national events, is the latest instalment in this story.

Many people really do place their personal life stories within the royal narrative. Just today on BBC breakfast TV the Indian heritage organizers of the Bollywood section of the Pall Mall pageant got quite emotive about the fact that their families were close up to the Queen during the previous jubilee. So we heard that as nine-year-olds they were waving flags at some event the Queen visited in Birmingham and that their Mum had been presented to the Royal entourage. People remember where they were and what they were doing at previous royal events such as weddings or deaths. Rather than measuring out our lives in coffee spoons as T.S. Eliot would have it, people measure out their lives in the royal souvenir mugs and other junk they buy.

Royalist ideology is effective to a degree because it is able to play to a number of social realities that people have an emotional investment in – community, national identity and some positive values like service or charity. The state gives some material support for this by graciously granting an extra bank holiday to facilitate all those street parties and organized events. The local government association has estimated that there will be 16,000 street parties this weekend. Millions of people will be going to these parties without being particularly pro-royalist but to have a good time.

A billion-pound Jubilee industry producing endless pre-landfill tat has developed. Such commerce expresses the wastefulness and tastelessness of the consumer spectacle. At the same time, people are having to decide whether to heat or eat and food banks are overwhelmed by demand.

The Royal family makes a big deal of a patrician notion of service so it presides over a vast number of charities. It also takes care to draw certain lines in the sand when it comes to the commercialisation of its brand – hence the tensions with Prince Harry and Meghan. One or two commentators have made the point that the utter amorality and lack of ethics of Prime Minister Boris Johnson reinforces a reverence for the Queen's seventy years of "service". In this way, the royalist ideological system is a very useful compensatory backup for our rulers when politicians are increasingly reviled for their venality and dishonesty. People believe Johnson might make rules that he does not follow but at least the monarchy is clean and is even possibly seen as something to be defended because it is not like Johnson and his cronies. Socialists should not underestimate how this 'separation' from the dirty end of politics means that if there were a very serious crisis for the British state then the monarchy could (would) be used to

intervene in a way to defend the capitalist order.

Notions of royalist service to the nation are of course totally exaggerated. Ross Kemp (Grant from the long-running TV soap *EastEnders*) went so far as to proclaim the Queen our greatest “volunteer”. Ross is not too clear on the way monarchy works – you do not volunteer but are born to it and there is even an element of “divine” selection in it all. None of the “good works” supported by the Royalty challenge the way the system makes people poor or “disables” people through the way it is socially organized. Whilst they may make pious remarks about helping disadvantaged people they are one of the richest capitalist families. They may make noises about the problems of housing for example but the Prince of Wales sits on a land portfolio that if taken into common ownership could provide the basis for a huge expansion of affordable housing for working people. There is a general lack of transparency too about the many tax loopholes that the Royal family benefit from.

The Royals have astutely modernized their brand and opened up more to the TV cameras. So Princes Harry and William talk about their personal traumas and endorse a slightly different profile of masculinity than male royals in the past. However, they know that the mystique of the monarchy with its internal rules and secrecy has to be maintained too. Carrying out the ‘firm’s’ day to day work opening things, doing charity or representing the military cannot be sullied by scandalous behaviour that crosses a certain line – hence the freezing out of Prince Andrew because of his connection with the paedophile Jeffrey Epstein. While there can be tension from time to time there now exists a parasitic symbiosis between the Royal Family and the mainstream mass media. The media is exploited as much as possible to keep the ‘Firm’ looking modern and up to date. Ultimately, even mildly critical TV dramas like the Crown are recuperated to their advantage.

Two other arguments are always rolled out to justify the monarchy. Calculations are made about how much tourism income is generated by the Crown. An increase in numbers visiting London this weekend has been heralded in the press. This argument assumes that all the buildings and artefacts associated with the monarchy would suddenly disappear if it was abolished. Countries which have abolished the monarchy like France or Italy do very well, if not better, with their tourism. The other argument is the supposedly positive attention the monarchy gets in the USA, Europe or elsewhere. But it is hard to distinguish this attention from the organized spectacle of celebrities in films, TV, sports or other walks of life such as entrepreneurs. In any case, the ending of royalty’s constitutional role in other countries does not inhibit their place in the spectacle.

Should socialists and republicans despair at working people’s continued love affair with the Monarchy? Certainly only 27% support abolition but this is an increase historically:

According to a [recent YouGov poll](#) conducted for the anti-monarchy group Republic, 27% of the population supports the abolition of the monarchy, with considerably higher dissatisfaction among the young (a report, Jubilee Britain, produced by the [thinktank British Future](#) shows similar results). That’s a notable jump on the [15% that has been the norm](#) for most of this century.

[1]

You have to distinguish the popularity of the Queen and the reverence for the monarchy. Prince Charles is seen three times more negatively than she is. It is a distinct possibility that the reign of King Charles would be less popular and republican opinion may increase. Rising support for Welsh and Scottish independence in recent decades is certainly something that can erode Royalist sentiment. The enthusiastic promotion of the more popular Prince William by the media and the family firm itself is perhaps related to the fears of a post-Elizabethan period.

How should socialists approach the problem of the monarchy?

The old distinctions between short term and long term demands or tactics and strategy are relevant here. In the difficult conditions of today with working people still suffering the long term effects of a series of defeats – including the demise of the Corbyn project – it would be pretty silly to make republicanism a demand to take up in mass campaigns or struggles. Even at the height of Corbynism, this issue was never really posed. It would have been quite possible to have a left reformist government alongside the monarchy.

In the long term, a socialist strategy is a different question. As outlined above, the Royals' ideological role and constitutional responsibilities are obstacles to any radical break with capitalist rule. The Royal Family's role in reproducing a sense of one nation that obliterates any real notion of class exploitation and struggle has to be fundamentally weakened if a socialist alternative can be really built.

On the other hand, Labour's social liberal conception of the nation fully aligns itself with the Royals. Labour Party leader Keir Starmer writing this week in the *Telegraph* has stated "it is your patriotic duty to celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee". For Labour, the institution and the state fundamentally remain the same but with their policies, they are infused miraculously with some better values of responsibility, progress and respect – or whichever other banalities the leadership's advisors come up with.

No real anti-capitalist rupture of the system can be achieved without a solid core of internationalist activists and mass leaders who understand the class nature of the state. You cannot postpone the task of developing that core to some more favourable future, even if today the number of people the left can win to such a perspective is still a minority.

It is often asked what is the point of small radical left groups? In fact, the Jubilee is an occasion when they actually have a clear relevance. The Anti-Capitalist Resistance current, like other groups, will openly talk today about the need to abolish the monarchy and explain its negative impact on working-class consciousness. We will not just write articles on our sites but will produce badges for people to wear and create conversations. Social media memes can also spread the message. In some places, there might even be anti-Jubilee social events. The arc of unanimity can be broken. Very few from even the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs will be putting forward this message. So wear your Stuff the Jubilee or Abolish the Monarchy badges with pride this weekend and enjoy the extra day off – unlike the royal family you have earned it.

Source [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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[1] *The Guardian*, May 14, 2022 "[Bring on the platinum jubilee ... but what will happen to Britain's monarchy in the decades to come?](#)".