

TUC congress in Britain

Unions put seal on pro-business agenda

Robert Stevens
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The first days of last week's 130th annual meeting of the Trades Union Congress were dominated by President John Edmonds' denunciation of a private sector boss who awarded himself a £50,000 pay rise as a 'greedy bastard'. In contrast, he said, the government's pay freeze on 'public sector pay below the rate of inflation year after year was destroying morale.'

The leader of Labour's dwindling left wing, Tony Benn MP, immediately proclaimed Edmonds' speech as the 'first swallow of spring' and the beginning of a revival of the fighting spirit of the trade union movement. 'At the moment we are in a very interesting situation where the new Labour leadership is working vaguely with the unions, but actually New Labour has transferred its allegiance completely from trade unionism to business,' he said.

The TUC spent the rest of the week disproving Benn's claim of a contradiction between the Labour government's relations with the unions and its pro-business policies. After applauding Edmonds' verbal flourish, conference proceedings were dominated by efforts to cuddle up to Blair and his big business backers.

Prior to the conference, the TUC had made repeated warnings that a recession was imminent which would mean 230,000 job losses unless Blair took measures to safeguard British industry. In response, half of the Labour Cabinet made their way to Blackpool to tell the TUC that no change in course could be expected.

Trade and Industry Secretary Peter Mandelson was applauded for advocating 'employer-union collaboration', urging the unions to 'actively work for and welcome profits' and to show 'moderation in wage demands and flexibility in pay levels in times of economic difficulty.'

The governor of the Bank of England, Eddie George,

was greeted in a similar fashion despite rejecting calls by the TUC to cut interest rates in order to safeguard jobs. In a BBC radio interview following his speech to the conference, George said that unemployment was too low and must increase in order to suppress wages and ensure Britain remained competitive.

In the week prior to the conference, TUC leaders including General Secretary John Monks, Edmonds and UNISON leader Rodney Bickerstaffe held private talks with Blair on the developing economic crisis and the role of the unions. They told him that the unions' role was that of working towards 'their employers' organisation being successful'.

The union leaders promised to develop the skills of shop stewards and full-time officials, to enable them to work more fully in partnership with companies. This pledge was the TUC's response to repeated government demands that productivity be increased. Following a September 3 meeting of a TUC delegation with Chancellor Gordon Brown and Mandelson, Monks said, 'There can be no doubt that Britain suffers from a big productivity gap, and trade unions have a role in closing it... We stand ready to explore with government and employers how best we can work together.'

In a candid interview in the September 13 issue of the *Observer*, Monks said that European legislation on union recognition in workplaces gave 'every opportunity to see not a growth in more adversarial trade unionism but partnership trade unionism.' He continued, 'I said to the Prime Minister on Monday that hard choices about the welfare state, employment and productivity should be on the basis of working together. With Labour's honeymoon ending, harnessing as many groups as possible to the same common cause is going to be quite important. We are reinventing the class

system. The seeds are there for major social dislocation and I don't think the rise in inequality is something we should be complacent about.'

Notwithstanding these concerns, the TUC is opposed to any real measures to defend the jobs and services on which workers rely. The only measure passed opposing government policy was to instigate a campaign against the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), which encourages the privatisation of the public services. Monks preceded this particular debate by warning, 'PFI is here to stay no matter what motions are passed in this hall'. To underline the point, conference went on to reject a motion calling for the abolition of the PFI!

The TUC is offering its services in policing the demands of business for ever-greater exploitation, but its ability to deliver on this promise has been severely undermined by the widespread alienation of working people from the trade unions. In 1979, nearly 14 million workers were affiliated to the TUC. Today membership stands at a record low of 6.6 million. In the last year alone the unions have lost some 200,000 members. The heaviest decline is amongst young people and the low paid. Some 83 percent of workers who earn less than £3.50 an hour are not trade union members.

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