

British union leader denounces unofficial walkout after calling for a "strike-free future"

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Hundreds of electricians walked out from government construction sites across the country for 24 hours on Tuesday, September 21. Their union's general secretary, Ken Jackson, immediately denounced them for "cashing in" on the year 2000 deadline for the completion of projects like the Millennium Dome. Other union officials lined up to condemn the strike as "cynical and calculated".

Jackson, head of the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU), was not simply venting his spleen against a small group of his own members. His attack put flesh on the bones of his call at last week's 131st annual meeting of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) that there should be a "strike-free future for industry". At the Brighton conference, Jackson, whose union has signed many no-strike deals, proposed adopting a joint agenda between the TUC and the employers' organisation, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). The TUC should even abandon its own congress, he added, in favour of a joint meeting every two years with the CBI.

His speech did not merely articulate the views of what is arguably Britain's most consistently right-wing trade union. It found a receptive audience throughout the TUC. His call was advanced as a taster for Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair's own speech to Congress. Blair told the assembled delegates that the notion of business and employees being "two nations divided" was "old-style thinking". He declared, "Britain works best when business and unions work together." He then proposed to organise the joint government/TUC/CBI conference mooted by Jackson for early next year.

TUC General Secretary John Monks led a chorus of praise for Blair. Amongst the most effusive was Bill Morris, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, who said Blair's commitment to "the

principle of social partnership" and his proposal for the joint conference were "particularly welcome".

The TUC was founded in 1868 and spent the first 40 years of its existence seeking to establish the right to strike. To this end, they were forced on a path that led to a break with their earlier alliance with the Liberal Party. The Labour Party was then formed in 1906 as the reformist political arm of the trade unions. Today, however, the right-wing pro-business evolution of Blair's party is shared by its counterparts in the TUC.

There is not even a semblance of a commitment to policies of social reform within the ranks of the union bureaucracy. The organisations they head may not yet be prepared to officially adopt a universal no-strike policy, but they have presided over devastating attacks on their members' wages and conditions while reducing strike activity to an historic low.

The unions have responsibility for over two decades of almost uninterrupted defeats for the British working class. They have worked hand-in-glove with the employers in downsizing industry and slashing public services. In the course of this they have lost the bulk of their membership. At the height of their power in the mid-1970s, the TUC organised over 12 million workers, making Britain one of the most unionised countries in the world. Today, that figure has slumped to just 6.8 million.

In his own keynote speech, Monks was forced to acknowledge that union membership was ageing and unrepresentative. The average age of a union member was 46, he said, compared to the average age of a worker at 34, and most young people view trade unions as "part of the past, not part of the future".

Only one in five workers under 30 are union members, compared to two in five workers in their 40s. Unions are mainly located in the public sector and have

little representation in service industries.

Monks, of course, views the problem as one of "perception" and "bad-marketing". He even proposed that the TUC rename itself "Unions United" in order to appeal to a younger layer of workers.

Monks unwittingly indicated the more fundamental causes of the decline in union membership in a pre-conference interview with *New Times*, the journal of the ex-Stalinists in the Democratic Left. He explains that today "fewer people see trade unionism as a vehicle for transforming society. So we must find new representatives who are respected, both by fellow workers and by managers, rather than individuals who are personally disaffected. Unions are never strong when their representatives are drawn from the disaffected."

When Monks speaks of his desire to exclude the "disaffected" from the ranks of the TUC, he is identifying the very layers of workers whom the trade unions have proved incapable of attracting. At the same time he is hostile to the basic concerns of those sections of workers still organised within the unions, who are far from happy with the constant erosion of their own living standards.

Like their counterparts in Blair's New Labour, the TUC bureaucracy constitutes a narrow and extremely privileged social layer who have done very well for themselves during the past two decades of unbridled speculation and industrial downsizing. As such, Monks and his counterparts like Jackson of the AEEU view "disaffection" and opposition to the pro-business agenda they are paid to enforce as anathema.

Monks regards even the AFL-CIO in the United States as too "confrontational" in its relations with the employers. In the past, he tells *New Times*, "I believed that conflict of interest was endemic in the workplace and that unions were there to resolve those conflicts in the interests of the workers. But that adversarial approach was part of the reason for Britain's industrial decline."

The unofficial electricians' strike this week was not the first embarrassing rebuff delivered to Jackson. Less than 24 hours after his Tuesday speech, over 400 AEEU members at Ford's Dagenham and Enfield plants staged a 24-hour walkout over pay and working hours. These events confirm that the TUC's ability to suppress industrial opposition to the employers has definite

limits. All that the speeches of Jackson, Monks and company demonstrate is that any defence of workers' interests necessitates a political and organisational rebellion against the official trade unions.



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