Blair's 1,000 days in office

New Labour pledges to continue attack on public services

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The passing of Tony Blair's first 1,000 days in office on Wednesday was a muted affair. The government did issue a document outlining its "achievements"—lower interest rates, inflation under control and falling unemployment—but there were no official celebrations.

Blair had said he wanted to avoid any impression of either triumphalism or complacency, but it was noticeable that the Prime Minister did not even appear before a Labour Party meeting to mark the occasion. It fell to Education Secretary David Blunkett to make the official speech marking Labour's anniversary, before a gathering of businessmen from the Anglo-German Chamber of Commerce at the luxurious Claridge's Hotel in London.

If the choice of venue and audience were not telling enough, Blunkett's speech made explicit the right-wing, pro-business character of the Labour government. It was Blair, not Thatcher, that had proven to be the most "radical premier" during their first 1,000 days in office, he said.

During her first term, Thatcher had mismanaged the economy and doubled unemployment. Even worse, Blunkett continued, she had "caved in" to special interest groups. Remarkably, this was not a reference to Thatcher's backers in the City of London and major corporations, but to Thatcher's supposed retreat before the miners in 1981.

What is Blunkett referring to? The Thatcher government set out to rationalise Britain's state-run industries in preparation for privatisation. The result was that hundreds of thousands of jobs were destroyed in the name of making British industry "internationally competitive".

As part of this, the government imposed strict financial limits on the National Coal Board (NCB), which in February 1981 announced that it would close 23 "unprofitable" pits that year. A further 23 pits were to be closed the following year.

The announcement generated widespread anger. On February 16 strike action broke out in Wales and quickly spread across the country. Miners in Yorkshire—then the largest mining region—threatened to join the strike within a week. Rail and steelworkers pledged to back the miners.

The Thatcher government faced a dilemma. Industrial action was also taking place throughout the public sector, including in the hospitals. In 1974, similar circumstances of general industrial unrest and a militant miners' strike had brought down the Heath Tory government.

Thatcher knew that the miners would have to be beaten if her government was to carry through its agenda, but it was not yet prepared. Consequently, just before the Yorkshire miners joined the action, the government issued a vague promise to reappraise the financial targets it had imposed on the Coal Board.

It was this statement that provided the means for the unions to make the real retreat. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) quickly called off the strike and organised a return to work. NUM leader Arthur Scargill claimed that the union had proven the government was "susceptible to pressure" and that Thatcher could be won round to the miners' case.

The Tories used the breathing space they had achieved to plan their next attack on the miners.

During their year-long strike in 1984-85, the miners faced the full force of the state, but the Labour and trade union bureaucracy ensured they remained

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isolated. The Transport and General Workers Union even issued union cards to scab lorry drivers. The miners' defeat meant the destruction of the livelihoods on which thousands of families depended, the impoverishment of entire communities and it emboldened the Tories to deepen their offensive against working people as a whole.

New Labour would make no U-turns, Blunkett told his business friends. Instead, he boasted that it was "taking on" the educational and legal professions with "controversial reforms"—a reference to Labour's efforts to abolish the right to jury trials and impose performance-related pay on teachers.

As for the medical profession, Labour's anniversary was preceded by a furore over the crisis in the National Health Service (NHS). Hospitals have been unable to cope with a flu outbreak this winter due to a chronic shortage of beds and staff, causing thousands of operations to be cancelled. In one case, a patient originally diagnosed with cancer had her surgery cancelled on five occasions, leaving her to watch the disease spread and become inoperable. This has fuelled demands for the government to stop cutting public spending and use the surplus it has built up to bail out the NHS.

Blunkett's speech was intended to spell out that the government would do no such thing. He made clear that Blair's oft-repeated claim to be challenging "vested interests" is a coded reference to Labour's intention to complete the destruction of workers social gains and democratic rights begun by Thatcher.

The Education Minister's display of bravado was obviously intended to impress his business audience, but it had a hollow ring. Thatcher faced fierce resistance from the moment she took office, and only the perfidy of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy enabled her to continue.

In contrast, Blair has faced no direct confrontation with the working class, despite largely continuing Tory policies. There are a number of reasons for this. The generally reactionary political climate is one. More specifically the traditional avenues through which workers would once have made their voices heard—such as the unions—are bureaucratised shells, responsible for implementing many of the cut-backs. There appears to be no credible progressive alternative to the government.

Attempting to explain why Blair had decided not to officially mark his anniversary, some commentators suggested he was mimicking Thatcher, who had similarly ruled out any celebration on the anniversary of her decade in office. Nobody pointed out that by this time, Thatcher was so widely unpopular, within months her own party would organise a palace coup to depose her.

Blair could hardly have felt comforted by such comparisons. The dominant attitude amongst working people to Labour over the last three years has been to "give them time". This mood has always been the political equivalent of a loaded gun, and there are signs that it is about to go off. Elected to redress the gutting of public services and growth of social inequality caused by Tory policies, Labour is making it worse. Both Blair and the government's popularity are falling. The type of measures signalled by Blunkett in his speech will accelerate this. The reservoir of good will on which Blair has relied is about to run dry.

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