

Britain's Labour government and trade union leaders unite to crush fuel tax protest

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The most significant feature of the anti-fuel tax protest that brought Britain to a virtual standstill over the past week, organised by a few thousand road hauliers and farmers, was the overwhelming public support it evoked.

This public response has demonstrated something fundamental about the present state of social and political relations and their trajectory in the coming period. Just below the surface of the apparent stability and political quiet attributed to a new period of economic prosperity by the Labour government of Tony Blair, class relations are extremely volatile, polarised and potentially conflict-ridden.

Economic growth in Britain has in fact benefited only a narrow layer of the population. Any sharp change impacting on the spending power of broad masses of workers—such as the 40 percent hike in fuel prices over the past two years due largely to high taxation—can precipitate a swell of political opposition and throw governments into crisis. The spread of similar anti-fuel tax protest movements throughout Europe shows, moreover, that this is a continent-wide phenomenon.

Since coming to power in May 1997, Blair has implemented major cuts in Britain's welfare state system and continued the policy of redistributing the burden of taxation away from corporations and the rich by means of indirect sales taxes and other measures that have cost the average family an extra £670 a year. He did so, however, under conditions of a relative upturn in the economy that fuelled a consumer boom and a significant reduction in unemployment. A friendly media proclaimed that all but an unfortunate few were prosperous and happy with their lot. A record low level of strike action and the absence of any effective political opposition to the government seemed to confirm this portrayal of British life.

When fuel protests swept France earlier this month, Blair dismissed them as Gallic excess. Later he denounced his social democratic counterpart, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, for giving way after Jospin agreed fuel subsidies for hauliers, farmers and fishermen. But within days Britain was in the midst of a similar protest movement.

The Blair government was caught completely unawares by events. Its claim that British people were repelled by the “lawlessness” across the Channel looked ludicrous as polls showed over 90 percent support for the fuel blockades and

protests that began last weekend. A government that prides itself on its ability to judge the public mood by judicious use of “focus groups” showed itself to be completely out of touch with reality. They believed that the hostility of Britain's tabloid media towards the French movement accurately reflected popular opinion, instead of the prejudices of the narrow social circles in which the government moves.

Blair's only response was to issue a stream of threats of state repression. Seeking to emulate the example of former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, he made quashing the protests a question of his government's authority. There would be “no negotiations” and “no u-turn” on taxation. If the protest was not discontinued, a state of emergency would be declared and the police, and possibly the army, would be used to break the blockade. Public reaction was hostile. Support for the demonstrations continued and even widened.

None of the Opposition parties fared much better. The Liberal Democrats basically supported the government, whilst the Conservative Party could not successfully exploit Labour's predicament as the preceding Conservative governments had first implemented higher fuel taxes.

The entire political establishment was shown to be divorced from, and indifferent towards, the basic concerns of working people. For days the government's only supporters were the employers' organisations and sections of the press.

The critical role in rescuing the government from disaster was played by the Trades Union Congress. They provided Blair with much needed backing for his threat to carry out state repression. After an initial public silence, the trade unions came out firmly against the fuel tax protests and in support of emergency measures.

On Tuesday Bill Morris, general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, instructed his members to cross picket lines set up by the protestors. On Wednesday, speaking at the annual Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Glasgow, TUC General Secretary John Monks moved a resolution opposing the blockades as “an unconstitutional and unlawful attempt to bully the government into submission... a challenge to democracy and a crude attempt to hold the country to ransom”. Trade unionists, he said, should have nothing to do with the “bosses' blockade”, which he compared to the CIA-financed

Chilean lorry owners' strike which destabilized the Allende regime and prepared the way for General Pinochet's 1973 coup. Some union officials demanded the arrest of demonstrators.

As Britain's filling stations ran dry, the fuel shortage threatened to paralyse sections of the public service and industry, including the National Health Service. Schools had begun to close; fuel for public transport was almost gone and supplies of basic foodstuffs were running low. On Wednesday, the blockades began to be removed, with spokesmen for the demonstrators stating that they did not want to lose public support by bringing unnecessary hardship.

Contrary to government propaganda, the emergency measures taken by Blair, not the actions of the protesters, constitute a threat to democratic rights. The fuel protests were peaceful actions taken within the law. There has been no evidence presented to back up claims of intimidation. In most instances the depots were not physically blockaded, as the protestors were able to rely on the support of the tanker drivers, who refused to cross the picket lines.

When Blair declares such actions to be incompatible with the democratic process, he is implicitly criminalising any expression of popular opposition that disrupts the economy. With all the main parties dedicated to the interests of big business, this would leave no way for the will of ordinary working people to be expressed. Virtually any strike, for example, could be proscribed under the terms of Blair's attack on the fuel protesters.

Monk's attempt to legitimise his support for state repression and hostility to any form of struggle against the government by references to Chile in 1973 should be rejected with contempt. The CIA was acting on behalf of major corporate interests intent on bringing down an elected government whose programme of limited social reforms threatened their interests. In contrast, the Blair government is supported by big business against an opposition movement of a few thousand self-employed hauliers and farmers, widely supported by the working population. The government repeatedly stated that harsh measures were needed in order to maintain business confidence in Britain as an investment location.

The fuel tax protests are socially and politically heterogeneous. Some of its leaders are sympathetic to the Tory right, but many of those involved were disillusioned Labour voters or had no political affiliation. It was dominated, however by groups representing the political and economic interests of the road hauliers and agricultural industry, while the giant oil companies looked on a movement dedicated to lowering fuel taxes with sympathy.

Why has a popular protest against the government been dominated by a narrow layer of the self-employed, while there has been no organised opposition by the working class to the pro-business policies of the Labour government? Because the TUC has opposed any mobilisation of working people against the erosion of their living standards. The trade union leaders

have welcomed every shift to the right by the Labour Party as an echo of their own business-friendly, corporatist policy. The denunciation by Monks of politically motivated interest groups "holding the country to ransom" echoes the rhetoric employed by former Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher against striking miners in the 1980s. Nothing could better express the transformation of the official trade unions from defensive organisations of the working class into an arm of corporate management and adjuncts of the capitalist state.

The demobilisation of the working class by the Labour Party and the trade unions and the political confusion this creates raises a real possibility that far-right tendencies will emerge, able to exploit social grievances of the ruined middle classes for their own ends. This danger can only be overcome through an independent political mobilisation of the working class, armed with a programme that addresses the social needs of the broad mass of the population.

The crippling tax on fuel points to a need to restructure the entire taxation system in order to place the burden of public finance squarely on the shoulders of the major corporations and the rich. Small businessman and farmers facing bankruptcy need subsidies and cheap credit to protect them against the big corporations and banks that are bleeding them dry. Affordable fuel must be available to all by taking over the oil conglomerates and running them as public utilities, alongside a massive investment program for a rail and public transport network to repair decades of neglect and under funding.

The fuel crisis is global in character and can only be resolved through the unified action of workers throughout Europe and internationally. Therefore the implementation of social and economic measures that benefit working people demands the construction of a new socialist and internationalist workers' party, dedicated to the establishment of a humane and egalitarian society. The Labour Party and its allies in the TUC have been exposed as a repressive force acting on behalf of big business. Only a party of a new type can give a lead to all those seeking an end to the present political monopoly of big business.

See Also:

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[14 September 2000]

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[13 September 2000]



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