

Britain's general election: Unions desperate to ensure industrial peace for polling day

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In 1999, Prime Minister Tony Blair told the Labour Party conference, "The class war is over". As Britain prepares to vote in a general election on June 7, and with all the polls indicating a solid majority for a second-term Labour government, action by striking post office workers is disrupting the despatch of millions of letters, including postal ballots.

Far from the class war being over, action taken by union members up and down the country is primarily directed against Labour and its privatisation policies.

Nearly 15,000 postal workers are supporting the unofficial strike, affecting 19 mail centres and 72 delivery offices across the country. Management sparked the wildcat action, when postal staff in Merseyside refused to handle mail diverted from London's Mount Pleasant sorting office, hit by an official dispute over new shift rosters being imposed as part of moves to privatise the post.

On Tuesday this week, college lecturers struck for more pay, complaining that Labour's insistence on private management being introduced in higher education colleges had brought staff cuts and worsening conditions, with new lecturers now earning substantially less than schoolteachers in some cases. The action halted classes in 290 higher education facilities. A series of one-day strikes by London Underground staff against threats to safety following a partial privatisation of the "Tube" could interrupt voting in the capital on polling day. In another dispute, train services in the southeast were hit recently in a clash with rail staff over management imposed working conditions.

Several recent press reports show that union members are becoming increasingly hostile to the "creeping privatisation" of the public sector under the outgoing Labour government, and which Blair has made the

centrepiece of his programme for a second term.

On Wednesday, Christine Hancock, outgoing general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, criticised the government for its measures to bring the private sector into the National Health Service. She told the RCN annual conference, "We have no evidence that private management will produce more efficient, or even better quality health services".

Her most vehement remarks were directed against Labour's rejection of proposals by a Royal Commission that personal services provided to infirm elderly people in their own homes, such as help with washing and feeding themselves, should be free. "It is simply wrong that we charge the most vulnerable members of our society for care that they would get free in a hospital. What a sad indictment of our healthcare system ... Nurses will not let this issue drop."

Hancock, who in the past has enjoyed good relations with Labour ministers, said the policies of the Liberal Democrats and nationalist parties in Wales and Scotland now came closest to those of the RCN.

Disaffection with Labour inside the Fire Brigades Union saw the annual conference voting Wednesday to support "candidates and organisations who stand in opposition to New Labour," as long as their policies and principles were in line with the FBU's. In a historic move for this Labour-affiliated union, delegates voted for a loosening of ties with Labour, against the recommendation of the executive.

FBU general secretary Andy Gilchrist said the vote expressed FBU members' frustration with the Labour government and local Labour fire authorities, as well as the imposition of election candidates by the party leadership, such as former Conservative Shaun Woodward in the safe Labour seat of St Helens. He said the union's "historic link with Labour" would be

fully debated next summer.

The same day, the Trade Union Congress (TUC) executive expressed fears that Blair's proposals to introduce private sector management and disciplines in the public sector could provoke a backlash by ordinary union members, and would also weaken the bureaucracy's own privileged position.

The meeting was attended by more than 20 of Britain's most senior union leaders, including those with a large public sector membership such as the GMB, Unison and the Transport and General Workers Union. According to a report in the *Guardian* newspaper, the union bosses have been "alarmed" at "the suggestion that few areas of the public services could not be put out to competition to private contractors," including the NHS.

The day before the TUC meeting, Prime Minister Blair had told the BBC he did not want a confrontation with the unions, but was being honest with the electorate so as to win a mandate for "change". "Anybody who comes to me after the election from the very traditional old left and says 'no you cannot involve the private sector in these things', I want to say 'no I made it clear during the election that we wanted a different partnership between the public and the private sector'."

Labour is going to the polls saying explicitly that it favours introducing more private capital and management into the public sector, which it claims must be radically "reformed," a codeword for cuts and rationalisation. Despite the threat implicit to ordinary working people dependent on the public sector both for essential services and employment, the TUC executive merely agreed to prepare an "alternative vision" for the public services, to be published *after* the election.

Whatever qualms the union leaders may have about Blair's embrace of Thatcherite policies, their main interest is to secure a second term for Labour. The union bureaucracy is as far removed from its membership as New Labour is from the concerns of working class families.

Indeed, the refashioning of Labour as the favoured party of big business is mirrored by the transformation of the trade unions, which no longer function even as basic defensive organisations of the working class, but as the extended arm of management in the workplace.

Labour has been able to rely on the union bosses to

suppress strikes and struggles throughout its first term in office. In the run-up to the June 7 poll, Blair has been putting pressure on the unions behind the scenes for them to ensure industrial peace prevails. Something they are only too happy to oblige.

The union leadership opposes the wildcat strike by postal workers, and has instructed its members to work normally, which would effectively turn them into scabs. The RMT union, representing many station staff and drivers on the London Underground, is working might and main to call off two further strikes on the Tube, one on the very eve of polling day. By large majorities, Underground workers have voted to take industrial action against the dangers to staff and public posed by a break up of the Tube. The government wants to hand the trackside infrastructure over to private companies, following in a similar pattern on the national railways.

The present disputes, although only involving small numbers of people, indicate that a section of public sector workers are not prepared to accept further encroachment into their jobs and conditions by the private sector, which sees the control of selected areas of public provision as a new source of profit. They are a more accurate reflection of the attitude of broader layers of the working class to the Labour Party than the plethora of opinion polls predicting record majorities and a foretaste of what Blair will face should he win a second term.



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