

Britain: Trade unions line up behind Blair's calls for national unity

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British political life is being placed on a war footing following the declaration of unconditional support for the United States by the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair. Working people are being asked to pay the price for pursuing the so-called “war against terrorism,” by sacrificing their livelihoods and democratic rights.

The main opposition parties have all indicated their willingness to form what amounts to a government of national unity. Newly elected head of the Conservative Party Iain Duncan Smith declared that these are “exceptional times requiring exceptional measures”. Duncan Smith said that he would allow his shadow ministers to sit on the government’s emergency committees as a sign of political unity. Whatever was required “behind closed doors” he would support. For his part, Liberal Democratic leader Charles Kennedy said his party would consider any approach to join cross-party talks on Britain’s role in the international coalition against terrorism, although he cautioned against ending “all domestic [political] activity”.

No organisation has embraced the call for national unity with as much enthusiasm as the Trades Union Congress (TUC), which abandoned its annual conference the day following the September 11 bombing of New York. The trade union bureaucracy, keen as ever to demonstrate its subservience to big business, has since made clear its intention to utilise Bush and Blair’s “war against terrorism” to end all pretence of opposing the attacks on their members being undertaken by both government and the employers.

The bombings in New York and Washington came only moments before Blair was due to address the TUC, forcing the prime minister to abandon his keynote speech. The following day the TUC announced

that no debates would be held and that the conference would close a day early as a mark of respect for the victims of the terror bombings.

This decision ended any discussion on government plans to open up even greater tracts of public services to the private sector.

Of necessity, this had been made the central item on the TUC’s agenda given the widespread hostility amongst public sector employees and working people in general towards big business encroaching even further into public health and education provisions, fearing the consequences of running such essential services on a for-profit basis. Public employees are concerned that if their contracts are transferred to private companies they could lose pension benefits and see their wages cut. Teachers and hospital staff in several areas had threatened to take industrial action, whilst opinion polls indicated that Labour could lose large numbers of votes if the government pressed ahead with its privatisation plans.

Although Blair abandoned his original speech to the TUC, it was circulated to delegates and reported widely in the press. In it, he insisted that the government would not back down: Labour’s plans for the public services were “every bit as crucial to the future of Britain as changing Clause Four was to the future of the Labour Party”—a reference to Labour’s abandonment of its previous social reformist agenda.

Whilst claiming that “Nobody is talking about privatising the NHS [National Health Service] or schools”, Blair insisted that the government would not retreat from its plans to open up the public sector to private capital.

Prior to September 11, the TUC had been forced to make oppositional noises to the government’s course of action. After the terror bombings, however, trade

union bureaucrats queued up to proclaim that it had now become a point of principle not to do so. Only hours after the bombings, announcing the conference would close early, Bill Morris, head of Britain's largest union the Transport and General Workers Union, said, "It would be inappropriate to criticise the government at this time, there will be another time and another place to raise these issues."

Nigel de Gruchy, general secretary of the National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers declared, "Whatever importance we might have attached to domestic issues such as privatisation pales into insignificance when compared with the problems that now face the free world."

The GMB, the union that was to have led the campaign against Blair's back-door privatisation of the public services, announced that it was urgently reviewing its plans. "It's no secret we still have serious disagreements with the government, but there is no belief or appetite that this is the moment to air them," a GMB spokesman said. On Tuesday, the GMB confirmed that it had suspended its campaign against privatisation, stating, "It is simply inappropriate to argue over this at a time when we should be showing solidarity".

Neither the government nor big business feels similarly constrained by concerns for "national solidarity". On Wednesday it was announced that the government had created a civil service unit within the health department to push through its plans for corporate involvement in the NHS. The same day, private hospital operator General Healthcare Group announced it would build a fast-track diagnostic and treatment centre, with a view to gaining NHS contracts on completion. With Britain's economy already poised to enter a recession, the US bombings have led to a spate of job losses being announced—the largest being 7,000 British Airways staff, on top of 1,800 already publicised. A further 1,200 jobs are to go at Virgin Atlantic. The TUC warned of a "stampede" to shed jobs. TUC General Secretary John Monks' responded by calling on the employers to show the same degree of solidarity on the jobs front as Blair is militarily. His sentiment was echoed by Morris, who urged the government to "stand shoulder to shoulder with British industry" as it had with President Bush. These appeals will fall on deaf ears, but similar sentiments will be

employed again and again in the coming weeks in an attempt to obscure the opposed interests of the working class and big business.

Such events underscore the political role played by appeals for national unity. Not only is this crucial in steamrolling a hesitant public behind the US led war-drive, but domestically it provides a means to curtail workers' opposition to the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions.



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