

Britain's trade union federation lines up behind Bush/Blair war drive

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14 September 2002

The annual conference of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) provided a showcase for the type of sycophancy and cowardice one has come to expect from Britain's trade unions.

Throughout the previous week, the media had been forecasting a major confrontation between the unions and Prime Minister Tony Blair over the latter's support for a US-led war against Iraq. News commentators predicted that Blair would be walking into the "lion's den" when he delivered his conference speech on September 10, and would receive a "savage mauling".

Kittens would have caused more damage. Not only did the TUC give the green light to war, it ensured Blair did not face even a peep of opposition throughout his 36-minute address.

The prime minister's trouble-free appearance was guaranteed when, just one day before his speech, the ruling council mobilised three of the four largest unions to defeat an amendment pledging the TUC to oppose any war against Iraq.

Having failed to pressure the small rail union TSSA (Transport Salaried Staffs Association) to withdraw its amendment, the executive provocatively denounced the motion as tantamount to treachery, with Roger Lyons, joint general secretary of the Amicus engineering union, claiming it could have been drawn up "by the trades council of Baghdad".

When the amendment was initially passed on a show of hands, the executive forced a formal card vote and the union bureaucracy fell quickly into line. The block votes of the major unions—including the TGWU (Transport and General Workers' Union), whose leader Bill Morris had earlier told the conference "read my lips, no war"—ensured the amendment was defeated.

Whilst the successful general council resolution declared its "unambiguous opposition" to unilateral

action against Iraq, and expressed concern at the "increasingly bellicose statements" made by members of the Bush administration, it stipulated that military action could be justified if it had UN authorisation and there was evidence that the country was developing "weapons of mass destruction".

Interviewed on the BBC, TUC General Secretary John Monks made clear the unions had no principled objections to a war. "The TUC is not a pacifist organisation and it has supported British forces on many, many occasions," Monks reminded the interviewer. Its concern was with the "processes which are used. For example, is there evidence? Have the weapons inspectors been allowed in? Are the United Nations involved?"

TUC leaders fear that Blair's support for a pre-emptive attack on Iraq by the US could isolate Britain internationally, especially in Europe where Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder has denounced US plans and made clear Germany will not participate. Under these conditions the TUC considers UN authorisation desirable to provide the cover of international endorsement.

John Edmonds, leader of the GMB general union, spelt it out. The TUC had sent a clear signal that if the prime minister stood alongside the UN, he could expect the full support of the Labour Party and the trade unions, he pledged.

But in his speech Tuesday, the prime minister made clear that whilst the US and the UK would ask for UN support, they would go it alone if necessary. The US and the UK would "respond to challenges" to deal with Iraq through the UN, Blair conceded, "But if we do so, then the challenge to all in the UN is this: the UN must be the way to resolve the threat from Saddam, not a way of avoiding it."

The prime minister also warned the TUC that if it persisted with “self-indulgent” rhetoric, it would be the one to risk isolation as far as the government was concerned.

Blair has the measure of the TUC. He knows that the Labour Party’s abandonment of social reformism and its disassociation from the working class would never have been possible without trade union backing. Pledged to defend the interests of British capital, the TUC has been instrumental in strangling workers’ resistance to the constant undermining of their pay and working conditions. Under Blair, the unions have played a key role in enabling the government to cut public spending and hold down wages, whilst ensuring industrial unrest has been kept at a record low.

Blair reminded the TUC where its loyalties lie. Partnership between government and the unions “does far more good than a lot of self-indulgent rhetoric from a few that belongs, quite frankly, in the history books,” he told the conference.

Such self-indulgence would lead to “less influence” with his government, he warned. If the TUC cooperated, however, the government would make sure there was room for its snout at the trough. Promising government support for British entry into the single European currency, the euro—a goal supported by most of the unions—Blair went on to praise the TUC for its role in ensuring the smooth passage of Labour’s workfare policies and promised to involve it in discussions with the Confederation of British Industry over pension reform.

“I offer again a partnership on this basis. No prejudices. No pre-conceptions. On either side.... My door is open to any union leader,” the prime minister said.

This ensured the prime minister received a standing ovation from much of the audience, with TUC President Sir Tony Young praising Blair for his “truly inspirational” remarks. “You have shown the glass is half full ... more than half full,” Young told Blair.

John Edmonds commented that the speech was “beautifully crafted”. “There were no indications that he wants to start a new love affair with the unions, but perhaps there were signs that he might be prepared to start a subtle courtship,” he said.

And what of the erstwhile “lefts”, whom the petty-bourgeois radical groups around the Socialist Alliance

had backed for election, claiming they represented a militant alternative to the union tops?

They either kept their mouths firmly shut, like Bob Crow of the RMT rail union, whose only gesture of defiance was to remain seated for Blair’s ovation; or, in the case of Derek Simpson, general secretary-elect of Amicus, gushed about how happy he was that the prime minister’s remarks “fitted in with everything” he had been saying.



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