Britain: Trades Union Congress disowns antiwar movement

Julie Hyland
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Britain's Trades Union Congress (TUC) has made clear it does not support the antiwar demonstration and rally scheduled for London today, Saturday, March 22.

A meeting of the TUC General Council on March 19 ruled out any official participation in the protest. Instead, some 48 hours after the Bush administration, with Prime Minister Tony Blair's backing, spelt out its intent to go to attack Iraq within hours, the TUC General Council contented itself with reissuing a one-month-old statement on the war.

Originally published on February 26, this referred to the US and Britain being "intent on military action in Iraq within weeks, and that action might be taken without the explicit authorisation of the UN Security Council."

It also welcomed the "massive and historic demonstrations against war held in London, Glasgow, Belfast and other towns and cities around the UK on February 15", insisting that "no democratic government can embark on a war without the consent of the people".

With war now under way, however, the TUC has ditched any concerns for international law and democratic accountability. Tacked on to the bottom of its February statement, Wednesday's General Council meeting added its deep "regret" that the US and the UK were to flout the UN. Referring to the parliamentary vote in favour of war—by 412 to 149 votes—the previous day, the General Council noted that "military action involving British troops now appears inevitable" and that "this risks damaging the UN and other international institutions and all involved share the responsibility for this massive diplomatic failure".

But the TUC called for all such matters to be set to one side, and for working people to rally to the support of war:

"Now that parliament is committed to this course, British armed forces and their families, and other staff involved in the military action, including those in civilian roles, will expect and must receive the support of the British people", the General Council states.

The TUC's about-face hardly comes as a surprise. During its annual conference last September, the TUC had already quashed a motion that would have committed it to opposing Blair's plans for war against Iraq.

A further indication of the position to be taken by the TUC was given in advance of the General Council meeting, when the leadership of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) agreed to suspend its strike action due for March 20.

Britain's firefighters have been involved in a long-running and bitter dispute seeking a wage of £30,000 per annum. The government had opposed the increase, insisting that even the most minimal improvement in wages was dependent on firefighters accepting staffing cuts and sweeping changes in working practices.

With the Blair government making clear that it would be at war by the end of the week, the FBU leadership capitulated. Whilst acknowledging that there had been virtually no improvement in the employers offer, FBU General Secretary Andy Gilchrist recommended union members accept a 16 percent pay deal phased in over three years—to £25,000—with strings attached. The offer was the best the union could achieve "in the current political situation", Gilchrist said.

The trade unions' concerns are not over the government's contempt for public opinion, much less the terrible savagery that is to be unleashed against the people of Iraq. Rather they fear that events of the past weeks have widened the gulf dividing the political elite from the mass of working people, thus undermining

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their own role as loyal enforcers of the interests of British capitalism.

A spokesperson in the TUC press office made this explicit, confirming to this reporter that the TUC General Secretary Brendon Barber had turned down an invitation to address the antiwar rally because he was "not prepared to be part of any movement aiming to topple Tony Blair".

The claim that the Stop the War Coalition, which is organising Saturday's protest, is politically directed towards overthrowing the prime minister is a lie. Indeed, the coalition—which includes the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Muslim Association of Britain—prides itself on having no political agenda, other than to stop war. The petty bourgeois radical groups that figure prominently in its leadership, such as the Socialist Workers Party, have been most insistent that this should be the case. Time and again they have argued that nothing must be allowed in stand in the way of "unity", and that all political aims must be subordinated to this goal. In this way the radicals have provided a platform for people such as Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy and former Labour Party leader Michael Foot, who have glorified the UN and the European imperialist powers—particularly France—as a bulwark against war.

Another key aspect of the radicals' political agenda is to inculcate illusions in the trade unions amongst millions of people opposed to the war. Despite the glaring absence of the TUC from virtually all the antiwar protests over the last months, leading spokesmen for the SWP within the Stop The War Coalition have repeatedly insisted that the unions represent the "greatest" hope of preventing war.

In London on February 15, for example, SWP leader and Stop the War Coalition convenor Lindsey German told the rally that the TUC General Council was to meet to discuss its attitude towards impending hostilities, where it could agree to call industrial action to stop the war. To cheers she told the audience that the trade unions would tell Blair that if he wasn't prepared to listen to the people, "we will bring you down".

The TUC naturally enough has made no such pledge. Quite the opposite, in fact. Its first act on the declaration of war has been to disown the antiwar movement and pledge its loyalty to the Labour government.

Whilst the Stop the War Coalition may have no intention of destabilising the Blair government, the TUC, which has long acted as a police force to ensure social peace on behalf of big business, instinctively recognise a threat when they see one. Congress House know that the mass movement developing against war also expresses the pent-up hostility of millions of working people against a government that brazenly ignores their opinions whilst systematically attacking living standards and democratic rights. For these reasons the trade union bureaucracy is making explicit its determination to side with the government and actively oppose the struggle against imperialist war.

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