

Britain: The TUC prepares a rescue mission for Blair

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The media's response to last week's conference of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was almost hysterical. To judge by the editorial columns and banner headlines of most national newspapers, Britain's trade union bureaucracy has swung sharply to the left and is hell-bent on a showdown with Tony Blair's Labour government over every major policy question.

Even before the TUC delegates met at Brighton, there were reports of left-wing union leaders threatening to block a five-year, £40 million deal to fund the Labour Party because of their opposition to Blair's support for the Iraq war, the moves to privatise large elements of the National Health Service (NHS) and education, and sharp disagreements over explosive issues such as employment rights and pensions.

Dave Prentis of the public sector union Unison, Kevin Curran of the general union GMB, Bob Crow of the RMT rail union and Tony Woodley of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) were all quoted making remarks highly critical of the government. Ominous warnings were made of a dangerous renewal of union power and influence, especially after Blair announced that he would be holding regular meetings with the TUC heads to discuss policy.

The Daily Mail accused Blair of running up "the white flag." Rupert Murdoch's *The Sun* complained, "For years the TUC conference didn't matter a toss... It's different today." *The Daily Express* wrote of "A fresh breed of trade union leaders...flexing their muscles and looking for a new fight with the government, with employers—with anyone, it seems, against whom they can pit their brand of destructive political militancy." Also in the *Mail*, Margaret Thatcher's old hatchet man Lord Norman Tebbit spat out, "These TUC cockerels, crowing from their dunghills, know they have outmanoeuvred Blair." He warned, "Now the culture of incessant strikes and stoppages, which the Germans call 'the English disease,' is also set to return."

Prime Minister Blair was even denounced for toning down a pre-leaked speech to the TUC's private dinner in Brighton's Grand Hotel at which he was guest of honour. He was expected to tell the union tops that "The idea of a left wing Labour government as the alternative to a moderate and progressive one is the abiding delusion of a 100 years of our party" and to warn them that blocking public sector reforms would be disastrous. But a number of union leaders told the media that no such statements were made and that his speech had been conciliatory, even "warm."

Is there any truth in such claims by the media of a renewal of

militant trade unionism? After years in which the TUC affiliates have presided over a constantly diminishing level of strike activity while loyally supporting every initiative by the government, has there indeed been a reawakening of oppositional sentiment?

Certainly, this year's conference was a platform for bitter recriminations against the government. The most significant came from Tony Woodley, the general secretary-elect of the TGWU, who called for Blair to resign for waging an illegal war in Iraq and the resulting death of thousands of innocent Iraqi citizens. Bob Crow of the RMT added that "Blair took us to war for oil and he lied about weapons of mass destruction."

The TUC then unanimously approved a motion condemning the British and US governments' war on Iraq, opposing any future US attacks on Iran, Syria, North Korea and Cuba, demanding United Nations intervention before a speedy withdrawal of coalition troops and the restoration of control of Iraq to Iraqis.

The harshly critical tone was evident in other debates, with calls for a return to illegal secondary strike action and the denunciation of the government for "driving a dagger" through the heart of the NHS. The fact that Chancellor Gordon Brown was given only 15 seconds of applause was said to epitomise these unprecedented tensions between the unions and the Labour government.

In truth, however, far from being a display of opposition towards Blair et al, the TUC's critical stand is an effort to continue its defense of the government under conditions of mounting social anger within broad sections of the working class.

The issues on which the delegates at Brighton spoke out were ones they could not keep silent on. Millions of their members and millions more workers who are unorganised are increasingly hostile towards the government for its lying over Iraq, for the constant undermining of the NHS, the introduction of ever-rising university fees and a host of other policies.

Under such conditions, to paraphrase Shakespeare, to simply praise New Labour would be tantamount to burying it. But protests and industrial action against Labour's policies take place against and despite the union bureaucracy, not because of it. For the union tops, the main concern is to attempt a rescue operation for Labour, focusing on an appeal for the government to change course.

TUC general secretary Brendan Barber's opening address was a plea for greater cooperation between the government and the unions, rather than a threat of growing conflict. He called on Blair to work with the unions, warning that improved public services required the "support of the labour force." And if public services

did not improve then the government would pay a “devastating political price.”

Barber also came to Blair’s defence over his after-dinner remarks, insisting that the prime minister’s speech was a true reflection of the comments given to the media and that it had been well received despite this.

The TUC leader had prepared for the conference by writing a September 8 op-ed piece in the *Guardian*, the most stalwartly pro-Blair newspaper. He wrote: “Many people thought I was rash to make improving union-government relations a priority when I was elected general secretary of the TUC nine months ago. Everyone else was competing for the most lurid prediction of how much blood would be spilled as we went to war.”

He predicted that “many delegates at our congress this week will have harsh things to say about the government,” but appealed for greater union-government dialogue—warning his colleagues:

“Unions this week must not make the mistake of thinking that we are guaranteed Labour governments forever. Voters are now both volatile and disillusioned. That’s not a plea for unions to stop disagreeing, or even a hope that we should spend more time praising them. It is a call to get the relationship right.”

There should be a “grown-up relationship,” he said. “Unions engage, agree, negotiate and work with employers every day—we should be able to do the same with the government... Every family has the odd row, but we still need each other.”

The metaphor is apt. What took place at Brighton was a family row between two sections of the labour bureaucracy over how best to maintain their political grip over the working class and just how far it is possible to go in openly advancing a pro-big business agenda without a haemorrhaging of support.

Regarding their strategic orientation to big business, however, the TUC and Labour are as one. In stark contrast to the apocalyptic warnings of the right-wing press, the director general of the Confederation of British Industry, Digby Jones, spoke warmly of the unions’ record in his invited address to the TUC conference.

“The reputation of the UK as the investment location of choice is due to several factors—the macro-economic stability delivered by this government, low inflation, low interest rates, low unemployment and sustainable growth—but it is also partly due to modern trade unionism,” Jones said.

“My members don’t want that to change and they are not alone. Our disagreements are always well documented but we do have common cause in many areas.”

The right wing of the TUC clearly has no intention of making any change to this relationship, as was evidenced by the warm applause for Jones. But do the left union leaders advance an alternative?

Though their comments are more generally hostile to the government, what characterises the stand of what the media has dubbed the “angry brigade” is their unswerving loyalty to Labour and to the TUC bureaucracy of which they form an integral part.

Before the TUC conference, Woodley also wrote an op-ed piece for the *Guardian* making clear that any criticism of Blair was guided by a perspective of moving Labour to the left rather than organising a political rebellion against the government amongst working people.

He also warned that disillusionment with the government threatened the return of the Conservatives “amid record abstentions on polling day.” Therefore, “Those who want a real Labour government—not just as an alternative to New Labour, but as the only way to block the Duncan Smith in Downing Street nightmare—now need to get their act together.”

This was necessary because, “For the first time in our history, a very large slice of public opinion finds itself to the left of a Labour government. On a string of issues—from pensions protection and taking railways back into public ownership to curbing fat cat greed and keeping the health service in public hands—this slice amounts to a clear majority of the people.

“Very large numbers also oppose the government’s support for George Bush’s endless war programme and are disappointed that this is the first Labour government under which the gap between rich and poor has widened rather than narrowed.”

Woodley’s mission is to make sure that those millions are corralled behind Labour once again come polling day. He advanced this explicitly as his alternative to a break from Labour. He professed to speak not for what he called “ultra-left headcases,” but “straightforward folk like Peter Kilfoyle”—Blair’s former defence minister and a latter-day critic of some of the government’s worst excesses.

He went on to counterpose the re-adoption of a minimal reformist programme by Labour to “flirting with far-left fragments.”

“Working people need a coherent and unified political voice, underpinned by an electoral discipline, Woodley said. “It is clear that this will largely fall to the trade unions, which founded Labour and have sustained it through good times and bad.”

Despite their sometimes heated words at conference time, what unites the left and right of the trade union bureaucracy is their common mission of preserving the authority of the Labour government and their hostility to any attempt to create a genuine socialist party. And that is also why Blair feels it necessary to reopen a dialogue with the TUC at a time of his government’s gravest crisis.



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