

# Britain: Blair and Brown make a show of unity at TUC congress

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14 September 2006

Easily the most inane comment on Prime Minister Tony Blair's last speech to the Trades Union Congress came from Derek Simpson, the head of the Amicus union. He told the BBC that he thought the prime minister had focused on international affairs to avoid more contentious domestic issues.

Blair is hanging on to office by his fingernails. He stood before the TUC after being in power for nine years, during which he has presided over the destruction of essential social services, sweeping privatisations and an unprecedented transfer of wealth away from working people into the coffers of the super-rich and the major corporations. Millions have been plunged into a precarious financial position, burdened with unsustainable levels of debt. Only this week, Citizens Advice reported that a poll it conducted found that 770,000 people fell behind with one or more mortgage payments in the past year, raising the threat of home repossessions.

Above all Blair has earned the hatred of millions in Britain and throughout the world for his part in the criminal war against Iraq and his more recent support for Israel's devastation of Lebanon.

As a result, Labour's standing is at an all-time low, to the point where it faces losing power at the next general election.

Blair's economic agenda still has the support of Britain's ruling elite. But his readiness to align himself slavishly behind Washington's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, support for Israel's offensive against Lebanon, and now America's aggressive moves against Iran have proved a foreign policy disaster for British imperialism. Broad sections of the bourgeoisie view Blair as damaged goods and are also demanding a change in course that at the very least distances Britain from the Bush administration.

Despite this, the TUC did all it could to give Blair a smooth ride, from the polite reception given to his speech

to congress through to the stage-managed question and answer session that followed.

These events serve to confirm that the agenda of the Labour government—both its anti-working class policies and its warmongering—is not the responsibility of one leader and will not be remedied by Blair's removal. It is the product of the political decay of the old workers' movement—both the Labour Party and the trade unions.

All that Blair faced at the TUC was a walkout by 20 delegates from the Rail Maritime and Transport Union, which was expelled from the party two years ago for giving part of its political fund to the Scottish Socialist Party. Once the RMT's desultory demonstration against "privatising public services" was over, protest was confined to a handful of delegates holding banners calling for "Troops Out" of Iraq and to shouting an occasional "shame," "bring them home," "troops out" and "Blair out."

The rest of the congress sat silently through Blair's unapologetic right-wing diatribe.

Once again Blair responded to popular opposition by reiterating his determination to continue backing Washington's efforts to secure its undisputed hegemony of the oil resources of the Middle East, threatening his critics with the spectre of terrorism. But, contrary to Simpson's statement, he did not shy away from domestic policy either—this time threatening those calling for a retreat from privatisation with the return of a Conservative government.

He began by invoking 9/11, insisting that the "war on terrorism" must continue to be waged, both in the Middle East and at home.

The Lebanon conflict "was just a proxy for another, deeper, conflict," he asserted; "part of a strategy of outside powers in a bigger game. Not the United States, of course—the Bush administration was defending "democracy"—but Islamic extremists and, though it was

not mentioned by name, Iran.

Domestically also there could be no deviation from New Labour's economic and social agenda. As for those arguing for an alternative to the dismantling of the National Health Service and measures to protect what remains of state welfare provision, Blair declared somewhat bizarrely, "We have to escape the tyranny of the 'or' and develop the inclusive nature of the 'and'."

One must recall that the TUC lined up full-square behind Blair over Afghanistan and Iraq and only issued a perfunctory call for a ceasefire at the height of Israel's US-backed bombardment of Lebanon. Its only response to the mounting disaster facing the occupation of Iraq, the descent of Afghanistan into all-out war, and the threat of a yet more devastating war against Iran is to ignore them.

The union bureaucrats have no intention of opposing the essential thrust of Blair's policies. They share fully Labour's pro-business agenda and fear that any opposition, once articulated, might get out of their control. Most of them hope that replacing Blair with Chancellor Gordon Brown will be enough to restore Labour's public support and in so doing shore up their own efforts to police their members on behalf of big business.

This is underscored by the absence of any significant programmatic distinctions between Brown and Blair, whether on foreign or domestic policy

Brown used the TUC congress as an occasion to reaffirm his backing for Blair and make a somewhat futile attempt to limit the danger that infighting will tear the party apart.

In an advance copy of a private after-dinner speech to trade union leaders following Blair's conference address, Brown declared, "I support everything Tony Blair said."

He continued, "I urge all to support Tony Blair in what he said about our reforms in health so that we can show that a universal health service free to all at the point of need is renewed and reinvigorated through reform to serve the British people."

Brown issued a public rebuke to those who heckled Blair and stressed that he would not take the party back to the left. He said, "I condemn those who walked out when they had the chance to listen and ask questions."

In response to this profession of Blairite orthodoxy, Tony Woodley, leader of the Transport and General Workers Union, said, "I have just seen a speech that I have not seen equalled from a trade union leader in our country for a number of years, a guy who has put out a vision on his ideas for our country."

Another union leader, who chose to remain nameless,

said, more tellingly, "It's amazing how you can say the same things and have a completely different effect."

Brown's major concern is that he does not anger the Blairites in the party to such an extent that they seriously attempt to prevent his "orderly transition" to Number 10 and that he maintains the confidence of the major business forces on whom both he and Blair base themselves. On this score, Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper understood the significance of Brown's comments. In an editorial defending Blair, it wrote, "Gordon Brown did well to stand firmly behind his boss and publicly condemn the protests. That's the kind of outspokenness the *Sun* demanded of him if he's to look like a PM-in-waiting. We look forward to more of it at the party conference this month."

The political impotence of the TUC confirms that there is no significant force in the Labour Party advocating a change in its essential orientation. This not only guarantees that Labour will not recover from the disastrous decline in its standing amongst working people. It must also bring the unions into direct conflict with their own members long before a general election takes place.

Members of the public service union Unison have agreed to stage the first national strike in the NHS in 18 years, protesting plans to sell a logistics business to Deutsche Post AG's DHL unit.

The day after Blair and Brown's speeches, the NHS's new chief executive David Nicholson told the *Guardian* that there would be up to 60 "reconfigurations," i.e., closures, of NHS services, affecting every strategic health authority in the land.

He identified Accident and Emergency departments, paediatrics and maternity services, adding that "some will come sooner" than a general election.

The essential issue facing working people in the face of Labour's terminal crisis is the development of a new socialist party that articulates their interests and takes up a political struggle against rising social inequality, militarism and war.



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