

# Britain: Brown gets smooth ride at Trades Union Congress

Julie Hyland  
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Prior to Gordon Brown's first appearance as prime minister at the annual conference of the Trades Union Congress, the media was warning that he would face a mauling over the government's decision to impose below-inflation pay rises on millions of public sector workers.

With the retail price index averaging 4.2 percent, Brown has stipulated that workers could expect little more than 2.5 percent over the next two years. Pay discipline was "an essential part of maintaining economic stability," he has insisted, even as bosses pay rose by 10 times the national average. And just days before mounting the TUC platform, he had attacked a strike by maintenance workers on the London Underground over the possible loss of jobs and pension rights following the collapse of Metronet—one of Brown's Public Private Partnership initiatives—as "wholly unjustified," and demanded they "get back to work as quickly as possible."

But the hardship now facing millions of working people as a result of this policy, and the anger this has aroused, found no expression at the TUC. The assembled delegates politely applauded the prime minister as he insisted public sector employees—which include some of the most poorly paid workers in the country—must accept the imposition of a de facto pay cut. Not even a solitary boo greeted the prime minister as he informed the audience, "There will be no loss of discipline, no resort to the easy options, no affordable promises, no taking risks with inflation."

While a handful of delegates pathetically waved small placards in the air stating, "Fair pay for public servants," Brown stressed, "Pay discipline is essential to prevent inflation, to maintain growth and create more jobs—so that we never return to the old boom and bust of the past."

Brown was so sure he would be afforded a grovelling reception that he chose the TUC as the venue to announce his so-called "Briton's first" job policy—the government's latest effort to dragoon single mothers, the disabled and long-term unemployed into cheap labour jobs. He told the assembled delegates that his government would make it more difficult for migrants outside of the European Union to get jobs in the UK by tightening up English language requirements. This is to be accompanied by measures to "fast-track" unemployed British workers into "available" jobs.

The prime minister's so-called twin-pronged offensive against unemployment is spurious. Non-European Union labour is already tightly regulated and geared to attracting skilled labour. In practice, barring a handful of such migrants on the basis of their language skills will be of no assistance whatsoever to the tens of thousands of unskilled Britons.

The scapegoating of migrant labour is wholly political. Brown's "British job for every British worker" deliberately mirrors the claims of the far-right that migrant workers are stealing "British" jobs. Such racist populism is the means by which his government hopes to conceal and divert attention from a stepped-up offensive against the conditions of the working class as a whole—and to steal the ground from the Conservatives who are making a similar anti-immigrant pitch in anticipation of a General Election.

Brown's target for 500,000 "extra British jobs" involves local partnerships between employers and employment offices. Retailers such as Sainsbury's and Primark have signed up to the new "corporate social responsibility agenda," under which they can receive a £400 allowance to train unemployed recruits. Jobcentres will then offer specific job interviews for lone parents, the long-term unemployed and those claiming incapacity benefits. Behind the pledge of a back-to-work credit of £40 a week will be the threat of losing benefits unless they are prepared to work for minimum pay in overwhelmingly dead-end jobs.

The TUC had no problem with any of Brown's proposals. For all the hyperbole over the trade unions threatening the government with a re-run of the "Winter of Discontent" that brought down the 1978/79 Callaghan government, the TUC has no intention of doing anything to jeopardize Britain's "economic stability"—despite it coming at the expense of workers' jobs, wages and conditions.

Earlier this year, the trade unions had overwhelmingly endorsed Brown as Labour's new leader, and the country's prime minister, without any contest. His role as the joint architect alongside Tony Blair in the fashioning of New Labour as a right-wing party of big business, and the 10 years during which, as chancellor of the exchequer, he had implemented its policies, received barely a mention. Neither did the public sector pay cut, which Brown announced just as his leadership

bid was getting into gear.

The trade unions had been most exercised about the possibility Labour might try to further dilute their influence in the party. A series of strikes in the public sector had led to Business and Enterprise Secretary John Hutton warning that relations between the unions and Labour were “not set in concrete”, and that the government had a duty to “serve the best interest of the people,” not a narrow “vested interest.”

Behind the scenes, however, Brown has sought to strengthen his connections with the trade unions on which he must rely in order to force through his agenda of further privatizations and cuts in pay and public spending.

On Monday, the *Guardian* cited a private letter between Brown and TUC head Brendan Barber in which the prime minister promised regular talks at Downing Street.

“I hope that our meetings will become a regular fixture and provide a fruitful forum for issues to be discussed without fear or favour, in addition to your bilateral meetings with various ministers,” Brown writes. “This could help trade unions contribute to the development of Government thinking and future policy. There will always no doubt be disagreements, but it is always better to have effective dialogue. I look forward to our next meeting.”

According to the *Guardian*, the letter goes on to detail where the trade unions are to be of use as “a key partner in trying to develop better public services, tackling child poverty, and taking action on improving the rights of vulnerable and agency workers.”

Writing in the same newspaper on Tuesday, Seumas Milne noted that talks with the TUC were “feeding into the behind-the-scenes negotiations on Brown’s plans for Labour’s own conference later this month in Bournemouth, where he wants to end the right of delegates to pass resolutions critical of the party leadership and government. The prime minister has been hoping to use his political honeymoon to force through constitutional changes which would put an end to embarrassing defeats on issues like privatisation and pensions at the party conference.”

Milne continued that the major unions “have privately told the Brown camp they’re prepared to compromise by not forcing a vote on critical motions in Bournemouth—but that they won’t sign away their constitutional right to vote in future.”

It appears increasingly likely that the pay-off for the bureaucracy’s role in suppressing opposition to the government will be the creation of more formal mechanisms through which it can participate in the “development of Government thinking and future policy,” as Brown put it.

To this end, Barber has called for a “commission into the distribution of wealth and income.” At a press conference, he said it was possible to “cut the cost of child poverty” by “ending the widespread abuse of the non-domiciliary tax break by the super rich, and replacing it with a proper test of residency.”

The proposal would enable “the trade union movement to build support for a new progressive consensus of equality and redistribution—not based on the old politics of envy but on a new politics of cutting the costs of inequality,” he pledged.

Barber is well aware that no such measure will be taken. And the TUC, no less than Brown, has no desire to do anything that conflicts with the ability of the super-rich to accumulate ever greater levels of wealth—the basis of the supposed “economic strength” praised by both. But with opinion polls showing overwhelming support for more redistributive measures, paid for by increasing taxation on the super-rich, the TUC clearly hopes it can restore credibility amongst millions of working people with such a proposal. Trade union membership has halved since 1979, to 7 million, mainly concentrated in the public sector.

Others have made clear just what is actually required of the TUC. Writing in the *Observer* at the weekend, Will Hutton, chief executive of the Work Foundation, attacked the recent spate of strikes, especially on London Underground, as “part of the problem rather than the solution.”

The trade unions mission needed “redefinition,” he said, a “transformation in how they understand and interpret themselves to themselves.”

“Like China’s Communist Party, they have to cross a Rubicon and accept that there is no conceivable way that a modern economy can be directed, owned and controlled from the centre. It does not work either morally or economically. The successful economy of the future, just as in the past, will necessarily have myriad centres of private decision making.”

“What role will unions have in the future?” Hutton asked. “I would like to see them play a much bigger role in pay—perhaps by sitting on the remuneration committees of big companies to help tackle CEO pay abuses,” he said. On this basis, “The heart of unionism would become coaching, mentoring and supporting employees as they sought career advancement, skills and work challenges.”



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