

Britain: Cameron and David Davis come out in support of strike breaking

Chris Marsden
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On June 23, the *Sun* newspaper ran a column by Associate Editor Trevor Kavanagh, “Tories must break strikes or strikes will break them.”

The article should be taken as a warning of the response to the upsurge of militant opposition amongst workers to the erosion of their pay and conditions being demanded by sections of Britain’s ruling elite. It should also act as a salutary lesson to anyone who believes the efforts now being spearheaded by David Davis MP to portray the Conservative party as a guardian of civil liberties in the Haltemprice and Howden by-election.

Kavanagh begins by railing against employers for having “waved the white flag” by agreeing to “a 14 percent rise” for striking Shell lorry drivers instead of sacking them for “causing panic at the pumps.”

“If ever there was a strike begging to be broken, this was it,” he continued, warning that the decision not to do so had “signalled to every hard-up worker that industrial muscle works.”

In the next period, he continued, “the government could face a wave of strikes akin to the 1978-79 ‘Winter of Discontent,’ ” which drove Labour into exile for 18 years and “apparently taught Gordon Brown that Labour would never regain power until it broke the link with union barons.”

A hardline Thatcherite who was reportedly reluctant to support Rupert Murdoch’s decision in 1997 to back Labour, Kavanagh complains that Brown does not have the stomach to take on the “600,000 town hall workers threatening to strike against a 2.4 percent offer” and “800,000 NHS staff” wanting “to renege on a 2.75 percent deal signed only weeks ago.”

He accuses Brown and his predecessor as prime minister Tony Blair of having “effectively neutered Tory employment laws,” adding that “Even those strike-breaking powers that remain intact will never be used by a Labour government.... [T]he unions have the whip hand over the party in power. With debts of £24 million, and no more peerages for sale, Labour is now the prisoner of its union paymasters—and they know it.”

His litmus test of whether a government can be supported is whether it will break strikes. And he intends to apply this test to the Conservatives, whom he expects to win the next General Election.

Noting that newly elected Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson “has vowed to impose a no-strike ban on militant Tube drivers,” he calls on him to “look across the Atlantic for an object lesson on how it’s done.”

In 1981, the PATCO air traffic controllers’ union in the United States called a strike for better pay and shorter hours. “President Ronald Reagan, who had secretly trained replacements, was ready for them,” Kavanagh writes. “When the dispute started he gave them 48 hours to return to work. Those who refused were sacked. The strike was broken.

“Secretly training new staff would be difficult today. But how hard is it to drive a train?”

He concludes by stating that “Labour have enjoyed 11 virtually strike-free years. That era will end the day David Cameron walks into Downing Street. Margaret Thatcher changed the industrial landscape but left plenty of unfinished business. *Will Cameron have what it takes to finish the job?*”

Kavanagh’s denunciation of Blair and Brown should blind no one as to what the government was and is prepared to do in attacking the democratic freedoms of working people. The decision to grant around 640 lorry drivers a 9 percent rise for this year and 5 percent next year was considered by management a small and necessary price to pay given that the dispute was costing millions and endangering Britain’s fuel supplies. Nevertheless, before this climb-down by the employers, the government had sought and secured emergency measures under the 2004 Civil Defence and Emergency Powers Act.

Framed partly in response to earlier fuel protests, this enables government to impose a virtual dictatorship, using the police and armed forces as strikebreakers and to suspend or amend the law at will—including habeas corpus and the Bill of Rights 1689. It also allows a parliamentary term to exceed five years without forcing an election.

In the event, a political calculation was made to agree an above-inflation pay rise, based on the conclusion that taking on the lorry drivers would be more damaging and potentially more explosive than sending out a signal to others that “industrial muscle works.”

This was an unpardonable weakness as far as Rupert Murdoch’s media empire is concerned. Kavanagh therefore puts Brown on notice that this will not be tolerated and raises the ultimate threat of a transfer of support to the Tories—but only if Cameron demonstrates to Murdoch’s satisfaction that he is up to the task at hand

Cameron’s response was immediate. That same day, he warned the government it was going to have to be “extremely tough” on the trade unions in order to avert a wave of strikes, before repeating almost word for word Kavanagh’s charge that Labour

was “so reliant” on union funds that the unions could “dictate terms” to the government.

At Prime Minister’s Questions, he continued the attack, noting that “Britain is facing a wave of potential strikes” and asking “will the Prime Minister rule out categorically any further changes that would weaken in any way the trade union laws introduced by past Conservative governments?”

Brown said there would be no changes, to which Cameron replied, “Is it not the case that trade union leaders look at this Prime Minister and see just weakness?”

“We have a bankrupt Labour party,” he continued. “It is in hock to the unions and a wave of strikes is threatened. As the Prime Minister lurches to the left, should not we all conclude that new Labour is dead and buried?”

It is an extraordinary feature of political life today that the Labour government has become so broadly despised and has moved so far to the right that it has been possible for the Tories to make a show of being the “nicer” party.

Cameron himself was elected as leader with a mission to distance the party from its image in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher and her successor John Major as a brutal, corrupt, anti-working class party of big business. His response to the barked orders from the *Sun* reaffirms both the party’s Thatcherite orthodoxy and its readiness to engage once more in strike breaking, mass sackings and union busting.

As the parliamentary spat between Cameron and Brown was taking place, David Davis was beginning his campaign for re-election in Haltemprice and Howden. Davis resigned as shadow home secretary to force a by-election that will take place on July 10, with the stated aim of opposing the Brown government on extending detention without trial for terrorist suspects to 42-days.

Davis claims to be the champion of civil liberties stretching back to the Magna Carta. Yet, he too had his “Kavanagh moment”—though in this case the newspaper in question was the *Morning Star*, published by the Communist Party of Britain.

As part of ongoing efforts to portray himself and his campaign as standing above traditional political divisions, Davis invited an interview with the publication—knowing that it would provide him with an audience amongst sections of ageing Stalinists and Labour “lefts,” particularly within the trade union bureaucracy.

The CPB was tentatively welcoming towards Davis’s overtures, but nevertheless felt obliged to ask his position on Margaret Thatcher, the anti-union laws and the right to strike.

The *Morning Star*, reporting the breakfast meeting at the House of Commons, describes Davis’s reply as rambling. It is certainly short and evasive, but it is easy to fill in the dots. He begins by portraying Thatcher as a proponent of civil liberties and the rule of law. “Under Margaret Thatcher, I was used to hearing her say what I thought at that time was a cliché, which was the phrase ‘liberty under the law.’”

“I thought it was a cliché because everybody understood it and everybody sort of accepted it and there was no party in Britain that really didn’t believe in liberty under the law. What is stark today is that this is no longer true and we are looking at a circumstance where people will be locked up for six weeks and the raw truth is that half of those people or more will turn out to be innocent.”

Davis is correct only on Labour’s erosion of civil liberties, but Blair and Brown only took over where the Tories left off. Thatcher’s anti-union laws, for example, led to the banning of trade unions at the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), tens of thousands of miners, printers and other workers losing their jobs, and the arrest of more than 11,000 striking miners whom Thatcher declared to be “the enemy within.”

When asked “whether he believes unequivocally in the right to strike and whether he supports the restoration of trade union rights taken away by Thatcher,” Davis replies that he used to “have rows” with his Communist grandfather “about these things,” before reiterating the standard justification for Thatcher’s anti-union laws made at the time—that they were framed in order to ensure not only “the right to be a member of a trade union but also the right not to be a member of a trade union” and the right to strike, but also the right not to strike: “You almost never find me supporting an individual strike, because almost always I think they are unnecessary, but the right to strike, yes, and the right to work [i.e., to strike-break], yes.”

Davis’s appeal for support is explicitly based on the readiness of others to ignore his views and the actual record and policies of the Tory Party. He told the *Morning Star* that “on picketing laws, probably many of your readers would not like my views, because I am a believer in protecting both sides’ rights.” More generally he adds, “There’ll be plenty of things in my policy brief, ideas that your readers will not agree with—my views on immigration and asylum, my views on penal policy, my views on economic policy.”

In other words, Davis and the Tories are in favour of anti-union laws, committed to strike breaking, want greater restrictions placed on immigrants and asylum seekers, and are avowedly in favour of the free market and a champion of the major corporations. But this should not prevent sections of the Labour lefts, trade union functionaries and supposed liberals from rallying to his cri-de-coeur in defence of civil liberties!

It is a measure of their own cavalier disdain for issues of principle that this appeal has found a hearing amongst supposed Labour “lefts” such as Tony Benn and Bob Marshall-Andrews. Far from their standing behind Davis being an expression of opposition to the degeneration of the Labour Party, it shows just how far they too are removed from any politics based on defending the independent interests of the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party took the decision to stand Chris Talbot against Davis because we were determined that he would not be allowed to hijack popular hostility to Labour and manipulate the desire of workers and youth to take a stand in defence of democratic rights. Our advancing of a genuinely socialist alternative in Haltemprice and Howden is a vital element in the ideological rearming of the workers’ movement on the eve of decisive social and political struggles.



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