

Britain: Unions lobby Parliament to line up behind Labour

Paul Mitchell
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This week, one group of trade union bureaucrats after another has traipsed into Parliament to lobby MPs ahead of the upcoming general election due in May.

Their essential aim is to restore shattered illusions in the Labour Party and rally support for its re-election. Unable to ignore the party's record of attacking the working class on behalf of big business, they are reduced to claiming that the presence of a handful of self-styled left MPs in the Socialist Campaign Group means that the interests of working people can still find expression in Labour's ranks.

The lobbies were dominated by a few dozen assorted officials and stewards, while there were no rank-and-file workers present. The unions have been unable to mobilise any support, despite the UK economy undergoing its worst recession for 70 years, thanks to the widespread hatred of Labour and a public recognition that all the major parties are committed to massive public spending cuts following a general election.

Whenever industrial action has developed against the constant assault on jobs, wages and conditions, the union leaders have done their utmost to sell it out and prevent the development of any political opposition to the government. A number of strikes have been called off after the "discovery" at the last minute of ballot irregularities. In many cases employers and the state have used the courts to step in and prevent strikes, most notoriously that voted on by a huge majority of workers at British Airways.

On January 26 the University and College Union (UCU) launched its education manifesto at its "national lobby" in Parliament, saying the event was "a key plank of the union's campaigning work ahead of the general election." In the event, the national lobby attracted fewer than 100 people.

Education is being and will be badly hit by cuts. In December the government announced its first reductions totalling £398 million for 2010-11 and one study suggests that cuts may reach £2.5 billion over the next three years. Hardly a day goes by without another university or college

announcing it is in severe financial difficulty. Up to 100 institutions are planning to impose redundancies and teaching staff at two thirds of higher education facilities face job losses, cuts in pay and working hours.

Despite huge opposition from academics and students, the role of the UCU has been to systematically demobilise it. It has refused to organise a national campaign of industrial action of its 120,000 members or mount any struggle against the government. Neither has there been any attempt to organise solidarity with students, a stance fully endorsed by the pro-Labour and state-funded National Union of Students.

The UCU has gone along with redundancies as long as they are voluntary, working closely with universities and colleges to ensure cuts have been imposed, declaring it "fully recognises the constraints on public spending during tough economic times."

UCU General Secretary Sally Hunt made clear that its "national lobby" was of a piece with this record, when she blandly declared, "The forthcoming election is a real opportunity for prospective MPs to demonstrate their passion for education," complaining that the government and the "other parties are yet to commit to any concrete policies that would give the UK a fighting chance."

On the same day as the UCU lobby, the leader of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), Billy Hayes, was also in Parliament presenting the union's new document *Time to Deliver—Royal Mail Pension Fund Deficit*. Hayes declared that the government, as the only shareholder—and therefore, the ultimate owner of Royal Mail, had a duty to sort out the deficit in the fund, believed to be approaching £10 billion. He said, "This document can be summed up in one word—'will.'"

"If government has got the will to resolve this issue, then it can be done in the twinkling of an eye," Hayes added.

Hayes and the CWU leadership called off a national strike of post workers just as it was beginning to bite. It is now in discussion with Royal Mail on how to implement major cuts and speed-ups that threaten 45,000 jobs. The suspension of the strike enabled Royal Mail to clear the massive backlog

of mail in the run-up to Christmas resulting from the strike action.

Labour's Business Secretary Lord Mandelson has stated that a bailout of the pension fund will only be "considered" as part of a planned partial-privatisation of the service, and that the deficit remains the responsibility of Royal Mail. Meanwhile the interim agreement signed last November and the no-strike deal agreed are continuing. A spokesperson said, "Royal Mail and the CWU continue to make good progress in what are very complex and wide-ranging negotiations concerning the whole Letters business."

According to the CWU Web site, Hayes "pointed to the soon-to-be-concluded transformation talks currently taking place between the CWU and Royal Mail as evidence that Lord Mandelson's challenge has been accepted and is being met."

The interim agreement signed by the CWU has left postal workers bitterly angry with their leadership, while management has renewed its campaign of speed-ups, victimisation and intimidation and sacking of militants. Reports suggest that the CWU is seeing a drop in members of 1,000 a month.

On January 27, it was the turn of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) to lobby Parliament. Some 120 bureaucrats were there to complain about plans by Network Rail (NWR) to sack 1,500 workers, some 20 percent of the total workforce, who are responsible for inspecting and repairing track, signals and overhead lines. MPs were being asked to support an Early Day Motion on the issues and to contact NWR and the government "to ask them to stop the cuts."

NWR is over £20 billion in debt. The regulator, who is appointed by the government, has told the company to slash its annual budget from £31 billion to £28 billion by 2014, and make savings of 21 percent in efficiency. NWR is out to break any resistance to the cuts and threatened to impose job losses by sacking all of its 13,000 track maintenance workers, before re-employing a reduced number on new contracts. The company is determined to make an example of signal workers in South Wales, who are engaged in the first sustained opposition to NWR's restructuring.

Instead of withdrawing all cooperation and launching an all-out strike until the threats were withdrawn and cuts reversed, the RMT has done the exact opposite. It has resisted calls for a national strike, has capitulated to every legal challenge made by company lawyers and called off powerful strike votes. At the same time it has mounted a pathetic letter-writing campaign addressed to NWR's CEO and launched its lobby of Parliament.

Back in 2002, when NWR was created following the

collapse of Railtrack, the RMT supported its formation and encouraged illusions that this was a positive step towards renationalisation. NWR workers have since been involved in a series of strikes or threatened strikes, as the company seeks to offload its financial crisis onto their backs.

Time and again, RMT General Secretary Bob Crow, feted as the most militant of the trade union leaders, has actively opposed launching an industrial offensive against the anti-union laws and the Labour government.

Another point should be noted about the lobbies. A substantial number of those present were members of the fake left parties such as the Socialist Workers Party. Many were themselves union bureaucrats, with positions at local, regional and national level. Their incorporation into the upper layers of the trade union bureaucracy has not led to the unions becoming "fighting organisations," but of their conversion into loyal guardians of its left flank. Those who sit on the executives of the UCU, CWU and RMT have fully collaborated in the betrayal of the workers they are supposed to represent.

As to the MPs self-identified as socialist to whom workers are supposed to look, they amount to just 23 individuals—including time-served party loyalists such as Michael Meacher, Diane Abbot, Dennis Skinner and Austin Mitchell. Meacher supported the Iraq war, was against an investigation into the Iraq war and for the creation of Foundation Hospitals and ID cards. He is only the worst of a bad bunch, with no record of struggle against the Labour Party leadership whatsoever.



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