

Britain: What exactly is the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition?

Chris Marsden
19 April 2010

There is a basic problem of political terminology when addressing the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, an electoral front dominated by the Socialist Party led by Peter Taaffe. It stems from the impossibility of accepting the self-designation of the groups involved as being “socialist” and the claim that the trade unions are somehow the representatives of working people.

The TUSC is neither socialist, nor even in any meaningful sense an oppositional tendency. It acts as a political police force on behalf of the trade union apparatus and an adjunct of the very party it claims to have rejected.

The coalition claims to offer a political alternative to Labour in the 40-plus constituencies in which it is standing candidates, and utilises certain left phrases. However, TUSC was founded based on an insistence not only that the Labour Party should be supported, but also that the trade union bureaucracy’s leadership of the working class must not be challenged.

TUSC has its origins in an earlier electoral coalition, No2EU, formed by the SP and the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), the Stalinist group that publishes the *Morning Star*. No2EU stood candidates in last June’s European elections. Its leading figure was Bob Crow, head of the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and a former member of the CPB.

The RMT made clear that the electoral platform was created solely to stand in the European elections, in which it advanced a nationalist agenda denouncing the European Union for undermining “sovereign” nation states.

The central focus of No2EU was its championing of the Lindsey oil refinery protests, during which the trade unions opposed the use of foreign labour. No2EU repackaged this essentially nationalist message as a call for equality for “local” labour and as a cynical ecological argument against the use of foreign workers. It insisted that, “Nation states with the right to self-determination and their governments are the only institutions that can control the movement of big capital and clip the wings of the trans-national corporations and banks.”

The CPB was happy to make a stand against the EU, but it had no intention of standing in a general election against Labour and rejected participation in TUSC. The same position was taken by the RMT. According to differing reports, the RMT either decided in January not to back TUSC or Crow did

not even put the question of support to a vote. Instead, the RMT is only allowing individual branches to support it.

Despite this, Crow and a few other union bureaucrats who have personally endorsed TUSC exercise a tacit veto on who can be accepted as a candidate. The RMT is giving official national backing to Labour members of the RMT parliamentary group and, at the TUSC founding conference, pride of place was given to John McDonnell, the leader of the dozen or so members of the Campaign Group of Labour MPs who are sponsored by the RMT.

TUSC candidates cannot stand against these Labour MPs.

The TUSC steering committee is dominated by trade union bureaucrats, including Bob Crow and Craig Johnson of the RMT National Executive, Brian Caton, the Prison Officers Association general secretary, Chris Baugh and John McNally of the Public and Commercial Services union NEC, and Nina Franklin of the National Union of Teachers executive. In Scotland, according to the SP, the steering committee draws in “representatives from the regional council of the Fire Brigades Union and branch officers from the RMT, the Communication Workers Union, the PCS civil servants’ union and the largest Union branch in Scotland.”

The SP needed some additional support for its venture and found it in the Socialist Workers Party and a number of smaller groupings.

The first precondition for membership of TUSC was to abandon any political position that might conflict with the central aim of the coalition—support for a Labour victory. The SP led the way. Though it nominally holds the position that Labour is no longer a reformist party and needs to be replaced, it simply declared, “We also recognise that there are different strategic views about the way forward for the left in Britain, whether the Labour Party can be reclaimed by the labour movement, or whether a new workers’ party needs to be established.”

To justify support for Labour, the TUSC platform asserts, “The likelihood is that a Tory government will make earlier and deeper cuts in public spending than a New Labour one. A Labour government may also be more vulnerable to trade union pressure not to outlaw industrial action in ‘essential’ services.”

The SWP was even less reserved in supporting a Labour vote.

In an article entitled “Who do you vote for?” it insisted that “there is an important difference between Labour and the Tories. Basically it comes down to class.” The fact that Labour has “implemented vicious Tory policies,” the SWP insists, has not “transformed the nature of the party,” which “remains essentially the same.”

“If the Tories win the election, reactionaries and employers throughout the land will rejoice—and celebrate by throwing more shit at us,” they continue. “Our first electoral priority should be to make sure left of Labour candidates at the election do as well as possible. But we will also vote Labour against the Tories where there is no serious left of Labour candidate.”

The smaller Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL) is equally enthusiastic in vouching for Labour’s bona fides. It asks, “Can we regard the Labour Party in any sense as a desirable alternative to the Tories and a new Tory, or Tory-Lib Dem government?”

It replies, “We believe we can and that we must.” Labour, it claims, has “brought in important limited reforms” and “raised taxes for the rich.... We say: vote Labour!”

Such lies could not be issued by a tendency that had anything whatsoever to do with the working class. These are organisations that not only do not advance a revolutionary alternative to the Labour Party and the trade unions, they consciously set themselves against any break with the bureaucracy.

TUSC’s call for a Labour vote is made in deliberate opposition to the millions of workers who have already rejected the party of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. The SWP, for example, prefaced its call for a Labour vote with the acknowledgement that there are “many” for whom “all support for Labour has gone” and who will “never vote Labour again” after “13 years of bloody war, privatisation and assaults on workers’ living standards.”

TUSC’s participants justify their stance with claims that Labour must be supported because it is based on the trade unions.

“Make any qualifications you like—and the qualifications are massive—the Labour Party will be the party of the unions in the general election,” proclaims the AWL.

“Labour still retains a link with the organised working class through its union affiliations,” states the SWP.

The significance of the TUSC is also measured by the degree to which it can win the backing of the union leaders. The SP insists, “Trade unions are still the basic organisations of the working class.... For the Socialist Party the importance of TUSC lies above all in its potential as a catalyst in the trade unions, both in the structures and below, for the idea of working class political representation.”

There is, in reality, nothing remarkable about the fact that Labour still enjoys the backing of the trade unions. Far from testifying to the working class character of the party, it only demonstrates that the trade unions are equally hostile to the

essential interests of working people.

The trade unions have undergone precisely the same degeneration as the party they once built. They are not defensive organisations of workers against the employers, but partners of management in imposing attacks on their members. When they do organise strikes, it is only to sabotage them. The bureaucracy enjoys a more privileged existence today than at any time in the past, even as workers have suffered a historic reversal of their social position.

Ultimately, the groups within the TUSC umbrella doff their hats to Crow and the RMT because they too occupy leading positions within the union apparatus. Brian Caton, Chris Baugh and John McNally are all leading members of the SP. Others who routinely cite their status in the trade unions in the TUSC’s material will almost invariably be members of the SP, the SWP or some other group.

These organisations represent the interests of a petty-bourgeois stratum that occupies a position almost exclusively within the public sector—above all, in the public sector unions. As such, they focus their attention on opposition to cuts that will undermine their own social position. But these calls are always framed as measures to place pressure on the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy, never to organise in opposition to it.

The development of a socialist and internationalist consciousness amongst workers, in the process inculcating an intractable political hostility to the bureaucracies and a spirit of independence and rebellion, is anathema to the petty-bourgeois groups.

This relationship to the bureaucracy—the chief political instrument for defending the rule of capital—defines and determines the essentially reactionary character of these tendencies, and not the pseudo-socialist rhetoric they occasionally utilise to deceive and disorient the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact