

After the General Election

The task facing British workers

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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Workers in Britain face the biggest struggles in generations against a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition set on imposing budget cuts, the likes of which have not been seen since the 1930s.

Tory Party leader David Cameron assembled his first cabinet meeting with the declaration that his government was getting “down to business”. Shortly afterwards, Foreign Secretary William Hague flew to Washington to pledge the government’s continued support for the war in Afghanistan, which is opposed by three-quarters of Britons.

The coalition government has declared its priority to be tackling the UK’s £163 billion deficit, accrued largely as a result of the multi-billion pound bailout of Britain’s banks.

It has outlined just some of the £6 billion in cuts, in addition to the £15 billion previously set out by Labour, that will be the subject of an emergency budget in July.

This rapid escalation in the attacks on jobs, living standards and public services was given the blessing of Bank of England governor Mervyn King, while the Tory *Spectator* magazine spoke of “Irish-style spending cuts to come.”

Public spending cuts of up to 20 percent are being planned, including in health care, which will be hit under the guise of “efficiency savings”. Geoff Martin of Health Emergency warned, “With £20 billion of cuts already backed up in hospital budgets, it is clear we are facing the prospect of thousands of bed losses, job cuts and A&E [accident and emergency] and maternity closures across the UK. No region will be safe.”

Britain’s 2.5 million unemployed are to be targeted as part of a clampdown on welfare. In the joint accord agreed between the Tories and Lib Dems, unemployment benefits are to be made conditional on a “willingness to work”. Cameron had previously insisted that those refusing any job offer would be barred from access to benefits for three years.

Economic experts also predict a rise in VAT from 17.5 percent to 20 percent before the end of next year. Such a rise could cost every household in Britain £425.

These initial measures are part of a generalised offensive against the working class throughout Europe, as the ruling elite utilise the global crisis to carry through a fundamental restructuring of economic and social relations in the interests of

big business.

The European Union’s €500 billion “emergency fund” agreed on Sunday is to be used solely to pay back banks and other creditors, the cost of which must be clawed back from working people. Access to the fund is conditional on countries undertaking “detailed and demanding” austerity measures.

Ireland had already slashed spending by €3 billion and imposed a 15 percent pay cut on public sector workers, in addition to a 7 percent “pension levy”. Welfare and education funding have been cut by up to 6 percent. Even this is deemed too little by the EU, which has threatened Ireland with fines if its deficit is not reduced further.

The €30 billion austerity plan announced in Greece includes pay cuts of 20 percent or more, a reduction in the basic state monthly pension by 10 percent and the gutting of social services.

This week Spain announced an immediate 5 percent cut in public sector pay, to be followed by a pay freeze. Portugal followed with a pledge to speed up its deficit reduction plan, in addition to a freeze on public sector wages already imposed.

Resistance to these measures is growing throughout Europe, and the coming period will see immense social struggles in Britain.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the greatest possible industrial, social and political mobilisation against these attacks. But success depends on workers developing new organisations of class struggle and a perspective that articulates their independent interests.

It is not only necessary to bring down the Tory-Lib Dem coalition, but to prepare the alternative—a workers’ government based on socialist policies.

The working class faces a direct confrontation with the Labour Party and its trade union backers. It is they who bear responsibility for the Tories return to office. For 13 years Labour acted as the political mouthpiece of the super rich, engineering a historic rise in social inequality that has rightly earned it the hatred of millions.

In the General Election, Labour’s vote fell by one million compared to 2005. This was made up almost “exclusively [of] manual workers”, according to Labour MP John Trickett. The party has lost fully five million votes since 1997. Amongst

young people, it has virtually no support.

There is no question that, had Labour been in a position to take office, it would now be carrying out exactly the same attacks as the current government. That is why ex-Prime Minister Gordon Brown deferred to the coalition talks between the Tories and Lib Dems. It was only when these discussions appeared to have stalled that, fearing a run on the pound, he announced he would stand down so as to facilitate a possible Labour-Lib Dem coalition as an alternative “strong government...with the authority to tackle the challenges ahead”.

Within a day, however, he had resigned after the majority of his party leadership made clear they were more than happy to hand over power to the Tories, with whom they have no real differences.

The subsequent claims of those such as David Blunkett and Jack Straw that they were bound to honour the “wishes of the electorate” or acted out of a desire to “strengthen” and “renew” Labour in opposition are entirely self-serving.

In government, Labour prided itself on its readiness to carry out measures that enjoyed no popular support, including waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan and draconian attacks on civil liberties, for which Straw and Blunkett are directly responsible. If they believed that a Labour-led coalition could have enjoyed the support of Rupert Murdoch, et al, they would have done what they were told.

In opposition, Labour will continue to defend the interests of the financial oligarchy, by working with the trade unions to strangle the resistance of workers and youth to austerity measures.

It is this that will determine which candidate wins the Labour leadership contest now underway. The victor will follow the injunctions set out by Blunkett and Straw to act “responsibly in the interests of the nation” and “reconnect” with “decent, hardworking” families on “issues such as immigration, benefits and fairness.”

This message was echoed by former cabinet member John Denham, who said that Labour’s mistakes in office were to allow “mass immigration” that was seen to be “unfair”, making efforts to “tackle poverty” that rewarded “those who are not working” and having “nothing to say on family values, decent behaviour, the responsibilities to work and obey the law”.

“A drive against inequality must recognise that not everything that makes us more equal is fair,” he declared.

What is being developed is a right-wing agenda, aimed at dividing the working class by reinforcing the Tory-Lib Dems’ scapegoating of immigrants and welfare claimants to justify the assault on the jobs, wages and services.

A realignment of politics along class lines is now inevitable. The crisis of the global capitalist profit system is creating the conditions for the political reorientation of broad layers of workers and youth on a revolutionary basis.

These developments are also exposing the real social interests represented by the middle class pseudo-left groups. The

General Election saw these organisations grouped in the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition pledge their support for the re-election of the Labour government. Its aftermath has seen a strengthening of their orientation to the bureaucracy.

While ritually restating its position that Labour is a capitalist party, the Socialist Party has declared that a campaign to “reclaim” New Labour by the trade unions would be a “huge step forward” and that “we would turn towards such a development”. It has registered its own backing for Labour MP John McDonnell if he contests the Labour leadership election as “the only candidate that stands in defence of workers’ interests”.

The Socialist Workers Party goes further. It had argued that Labour remained a workers party due to its “link with the organised working class through its union affiliations”. In its post-election analysis, it now claims that the election result “showed the enduring strength of Labourism” and the beginning of a “return to Labour”.

These spurious assertions amount to a declaration of support for Labour against the working class. It is a pledge to the Labour and trade union bureaucracy that the SWP will act against the development of any challenge to its control from the left.

The SEP opposed a vote for Labour, defining it as a “party of the class enemy”. We told the truth: that working people must face up to the challenge of building a new and genuinely socialist party.

Our aim was to prepare the ground for the development of “an independent political movement of the working class against austerity, militarism and war”.

This must be waged in opposition to the capitalist profit system. It must be international in scope, uniting workers across all national borders against the common enemy for the socialist reorganization of economic life to meet social needs, not private profit.

The SEP, together with our co-thinkers in the International Committee of the Fourth International, offers working people the only means through which such a unified offensive for international socialism can be realised.

For information on how to join the Socialist Equality Party, click here.



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