

British unions block struggle against government austerity plans

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3 July 2010

Britain's Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition has announced public spending cuts that are possibly the most savage in Europe. Every week sees fresh declarations of cuts on top of those already identified by the outgoing Labour government prior to the May general election. This includes a three-year public sector pay freeze, an attack on pensions, and hundreds of thousands of job losses.

Chancellor George Osborne announced £11 billion extra cuts, but this was immediately followed by demands for benefit payments to be slashed. The total so far runs to £27 billion in additional cuts, as well as £15 billion in tax rises, bringing the squeeze to £75 billion a year by 2015. Many commentators predict this is an underestimate and that between £85 billion and £100 billion in cuts are planned.

The cuts already confirmed will lead to 1.3 million jobs being eliminated in the public and private sector, driving official unemployment to between 3 and 4 million from its present 2.5 million. Government claims that this will be compensated for by an increase of 2 million private sector jobs are ludicrous, given that austerity measures are part of a global process that is plunging the UK and the world economy into a second round of recession deeper than that which began in 2008.

The UK now faces the "longest, deepest, sustained period of cuts to public services spending at least since World War II", according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS). The government admits to cuts across all departments except health and foreign aid of at least 25 percent.

VAT has been increased from 17.5 percent to 20 percent, costing families an average of £400 a year. The austerity measures will hit poorer households "significantly harder than richer households," the IFS explain, in some cases by *a factor of six*.

The most vulnerable are being targeted by cuts to

Housing Benefit and a campaign to drive at least half a million off Incapacity Benefit through a stepped-up regime of "fitness to work" tests. Graduate unemployment will soar to record levels because of the disproportionate number of public sector jobs graduates take up—rising to as much as 25 percent.

This is nothing less than a declaration of war against working people on behalf of the corporate elite. But, as should be expected, the response of the trade union bureaucracy has been to run up the white flag.

In the last week, Unite called off the strike by British Airways cabin crew—after 22 days of action—to ballot on a risible and barely changed offer by the company, without any recommendation to reject by the union. Meanwhile, BA is recruiting new crew on a lower pay rate so that it can sack its existing workforce.

More telling still, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) has invited Prime Minister David Cameron to address its annual meeting in September.

The unions have even made clear they do not want to participate in the token September 29 "day of action" organised by the European Trade Union Confederation, under the leadership of Britain's former TUC General Secretary John Monks, because the timing clashes with the Labour Party conference!

The press barely addresses these issues, focusing instead upon the statements of Bob Crow, general secretary of the Rail Maritime and Transport union, at its annual conference. Crow denounced Cameron's "full-frontal assault on the trade union movement on a scale which is unprecedented since Margaret Thatcher's government set out to smash the National Union of Mineworkers".

"When someone's winding up to give you a kicking you have a clear choice—you can either take them on right from the off or you can roll over and hope that they go away", he said. "This is not the time for talking, it's the time for action. We need an emergency meeting of the

Trades Union Congress to co-ordinate the political and industrial action that we will need to take as a united movement to drive back the ConDem attack on our members”.

Crow’s call for “a sustained campaign of generalised strikes” only serves to underscore that the TUC is indeed rolling over, and the only campaign it is waging is to ensure that nothing at all is done to oppose the “ConDem attack”. Without addressing the actual role of the trade unions in suppressing industrial action and collaborating with management and the government, all such calls to action are a deception designed to disarm working people to the reality of the situation they face.

This is the conscious aim of Crow and those fake “left” tendencies that similarly urge the working class to place their trust in the union bureaucracy.

No trade union leader, including Crow, has put forward a single concrete proposal to oppose the attacks that the coalition government is making. They are continuing the supportive role they played under 13 years of a Labour government, while it acted as a tool of the financial oligarchy and the City of London.

Even now they will be able to work with several former Labour luminaries who have joined Cameron and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg’s government, including John Hutton, the former work and pensions secretary, Cameron’s “trade union envoy” and former Labour member of the European Parliament Richard Balfe, and the new “poverty tsar”, Frank Field, who is still being allowed to continue as a Labour MP.

In the face of this record, *Socialist Worker*, the newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party, offers as a “test of commitment to fight the government and the bosses” whether the unions will take part in a “protest at the Tory party conference on 3 October” and “protests on 20 October when the government’s spending review is announced”.

“A big demonstration on 3 October can increase the pressure on union leaders to call the action we need”, the British SWP claims.

The Socialist Party-led National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) called at its conference for “the TUC to name the day for a national demonstration, preferably before the TUC conference in September 2010”.

“As soon as [!] a date for a demonstration is announced, our central priority will be to build for the maximum possible turnout. If a demo is not called, the NSSN will call a lobby of the TUC Conference in Manchester (day, date and time to be decided) urging the TUC to call a

united national demonstration with a view to further organising a one-day public sector strike, as the beginning of a serious fightback against these vicious cuts”.

There is nothing serious about such genuflection before union leaders by those occupying a lower rank in the apparatus, not to mention the inaction of the many SWP and SP members who themselves occupy leading union posts.

The bitter experience of workers everywhere is that the trade unions either prevent or betray every struggle waged by workers against the employers. In Britain, they have done this in uninterrupted fashion ever since the 1984-85 miners’ strike against Thatcher cited by Crow.

This essential function of the trade unions would not be altered one iota should they feel forced to call a few one-day protest strikes to diffuse the anger felt by working people. Nothing less than a general strike movement is sufficient to meet the challenge to workers’ fundamental social interests that has now begun. Without an all-out offensive against the ruling elite, millions face abject poverty, mass unemployment and a brutal existence.

Such a movement must be aimed at bringing down the government and poses the questions: Who will lead such a struggle? What will replace the Tories and Liberal Democrats in power?

The answer points to the burning necessity of breaking from the straitjacket of the trade unions and their accomplices in the pro-business Labour Party, through establishing genuine rank-and-file organisations of class struggle. It means that workers must build their own party, the Socialist Equality Party, which is committed to the struggle for power and a socialist programme for the reorganisation of economic life in the interests of the vast majority through a unified political and social movement of workers throughout Europe and the world.

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