

A fraudulent “coalition of resistance” in Britain

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Veteran British Labourite Tony Benn has launched a call for “a broad movement of active resistance” to the UK Conservative/Liberal-Democrat coalition government’s austerity measures.

He announced his “coalition of resistance” in the *Guardian’s* “Comment is Free” section on August 4. His call was backed by 73 signatories: just two Labour MPs, John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn, the solitary Green Party MP, Caroline Lucas, a handful of trade union leaders, including Mark Serwotka of the PCS civil service union and Bob Crow of the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, as well as prominent figures from the media, such as Ken Loach, and academics and campaigners who have the reputation of being “on the left”. A variety of pseudo-left groups then endorsed his call and began campaigning on his behalf.

Benn’s campaign is fraudulent and should be rejected as a diversion by everyone genuinely seeking to oppose the savage cuts to the welfare state and public sector jobs. Benn revealed its bogus nature when he compared the movement he has in mind to that organised by the Greek trade unions.

The Greek unions have called a series of 24-hour stoppages that have not halted the government’s programme of austerity measures, but which were expressly designed to let off steam without threatening the PASOK government’s ability to impose the cuts demanded by the global markets. When the Greek truck drivers went on strike threatening to bring the economy to a standstill, the government responded by conscripting the drivers and bringing in the army to smash the strike. The response of their union, which had been trying to cut a deal with the government all along, was to capitulate. The presence of the army on the streets in a country that was living under a military

junta from 1967 to 1974 is a stark warning of how sharp class antagonisms have become. European governments are attempting to dismantle welfare states that were built up in the post-war period. Such a wholesale destruction of social conditions demands a decisive shift in class relations and cannot be carried out within the framework of parliamentary democracy.

The lesson that workers in the UK should draw from the Greek events is not that they should put their faith in the unions, as Benn insists, but that they need to organise independent resistance to the government’s austerity measures. Jobs and services cannot be defended under the leadership of either the trade unions or a handful of Labour MPs whose loyalty rests entirely with British capitalism. If Benn’s “coalition of resistance” involves any resistance at all, it will be resistance to an independent movement of workers.

What the UK unions are actually planning was made clear by Derek Simpson, the leader of Unite, Britain’s biggest union. He told the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show* that he did not support strikes against the government’s spending cuts. He opposed any suggestion that there should be a “winter of discontent” and specifically rejected the suggestion that there would be opposition on the scale of that in Greece.

“I don’t think that’s the nature of the British public—we don’t have the volatile nature of the French or the Greeks”, he said.

If there has not so far been any expression of organised resistance to the cuts by the working class in Britain, this is not due to any pacific or placid character of the working class. It is because, in the trade union, workers confront an organised conspiracy to demobilise opposition to big business through the suppression of the class struggle.

Simpson's invoking of a supposed British exceptionalism is true only insofar as the British trade unions here have gone even further in accepting the demands of international finance capital even than those of Greece and other continental European countries. The trade unions have worked hand in glove for the last 13 years with a Labour government that represented the financial oligarchy of the City of London. Unemployment actually rose by more than three quarters of a million in the last three months of the Labour government and would be even higher had the unemployed not been forced off benefits and into the low-paid part-time work.

Most of the cuts that are now going through were in fact planned by that Labour government. Labour claimed that it would defend "front-line services" and ring fence the National Health Service. But 11,000 jobs have already gone from the NHS and more are in line to go under austerity measures that were planned by Prime Minister Gordon Brown. This is before any of the new government's cuts begin to bite.

Simpson's own opposition to any fight against the employers found full expression in Unite's betrayal of the recent strike by British Airways cabin crew. In its aftermath, dozens of workers, including low-ranking trade union officials, have been suspended or sacked with no opposition from the union.

Unite and Unison, the two largest unions, that between them represent half of the unionised workers in Britain, even blocked calls for a token protest march advocated by a small number of unions to coincide with the announcement of the Chancellor George Osborne's spending review in October—a position endorsed by the majority of the Trades Union Congress.

The unions fully agree that cuts must be made. Brendan Barber, general secretary of the TUC, told the *Independent* that he accepted the need for "efficiencies" in the public sector. His only objection to the government's measures is that they are moving too quickly for the job losses to be "absorbed".

The bureaucracy is offering its services in imposing austerity measures on their members as long as they can keep their privileged position. Benn in turn is offering a left cover for the trade union leaders, while ensuring that all opposition to the austerity measures of the coalition is kept firmly under the control of the Labour Party and the trade unions.

"The time to organise resistance is now", Benn declares. What he means is that a conference will be organised in November—six months after Cameron and Clegg came to power—where there will be the usual redundant pleading for the TUC to "get off its knees" and organise a fight-back. By November, Benn also hopes that September's TUC conference will have passed without incident, along with the Labour Party conference and a leadership election in which he is backing Ed Miliband, a former advisor to Labour leader Gordon Brown who sat loyally in his cabinet.

Benn is someone who has been intimately involved in more betrayals and defeats of workers' struggles than perhaps any man alive. As both a government minister and backbench MP, he has specialised in the use of the mildest left rhetoric to conceal his unswerving loyalty to the Labour bureaucracy and the capitalist social order it defends. His six decades in Labour politics have given him the experience to know that anger is mounting against the government's austerity package and will break out in spontaneous action unless there is a mechanism to contain it and direct it into safe official channels. His coalition of resistance is an attempt to provide that mechanism.

Benn is not alone in recognising that the emergence of mass opposition is inevitable. Under the headline, "After lighting the blue touchpaper, coalition waits to be hit by first blast", wrote Rupert Murdoch's *Times*, warning of "volatile times ahead as the cutbacks begin to provoke public and political discontent". The government, it went on, "have lit a hundred fuses...many will detonate to varying degrees throughout the autumn". However, this emerging opposition can and must emerge only through a political and organisational rebellion against the trade union and Labour Party apparatus that Benn and his allies seek to defend.

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