

British trade unions hold secret talks with government

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With the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government planning the most drastic attacks on the working class since the 1930s, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) is working to ensure they are imposed without opposition.

On taking office the government of Tory Prime Minister David Cameron and his Liberal Democrat deputy, Nick Clegg, announced £6.2 billion in cuts. Further massive cuts were outlined in an emergency budget 50 days later, including a cut in welfare spending on child benefit and housing benefits, a public sector pay freeze and cuts of 25 percent in public service spending. The sales tax, VAT was also increased from 17.5 percent to 20 percent.

Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) found that the June budget was “regressive”, with low-income families with children losing the most.

The government also announced that its October 20 Comprehensive Spending Review would detail its overall spending cuts, with all government departments except two asked to present plans for cuts of between 25 and 40 percent.

It is estimated that over the next five years, at least 600,000 jobs will be lost in the public sector and up to 140,000 per year in the private sector. Millions of people and their families will be forced into poverty.

The TUC has been at pains to insist that it will not pose any threat to any of this being implemented.

In July the TUC, at the behest of its two largest unions Unite and Unison, ruled out even a national protest against the government’s measures. Earlier this month Unite joint general secretary, Derek Simpson, stated on national TV that his union, with a membership of two million, would not call any strikes. He ruled out any suggestion that there would be a “winter of discontent”, or opposition on the scale of that in Greece.

The TUC’s message is not lost on the government.

According to the August 24 *Independent* senior Conservatives have held secret talks with trade union

leaders in preparation for a meeting between Cameron and the TUC general secretary Brendan Barber. Over the past few months, “several ministers, including Oliver Letwin, Philip Hammond and Francis Maude, have either met trade union leaders or addressed TUC events.”

Letwin, a non-executive director of NM Rothschild Corporate Finance Ltd, was from 1983 to 1986 a member of Margaret Thatcher’s Policy Unit. In the 2001 general election campaign he called for public spending to be slashed by £20 billion per annum.

The *Independent* cited a “Conservative source” who said, “We are never going to be flavour of the month with them [the unions], given their Labour links, but we want to get back to where we were before Thatcher. Although obviously we differ, there is recognition that it is better for everyone if we spoke.”

Speaking about a planned meeting between Cameron and the TUC general secretary later this year he said, “I am sure something will be set up. It’s in both sides’ interests.”

Earlier this year, it emerged that the TUC had planned to invite Cameron to address their September annual conference. This was apparently declined by Cameron on the grounds that he would be taking paternity leave after the birth of his child.

The TUC has already had one of its conferences addressed by Liberal Democrat Vince Cable, the government’s Business Secretary. Also speaking at its Unionlearn conference was Further Education Minister John Hayes—the first Conservative minister to appear at a TUC event since the mid-1990s.

While Cameron will not address the TUC in the autumn, an invitation was extended to Mervyn King, the Governor of the Bank of England, who has accepted.

King is an outspoken proponent of austerity measures. He was involved in intimate discussions with Cameron and Clegg following the election and warned them that

unless they announced immediate austerity measures there would be a run on the pound and a possible collapse of the economy. King stated that there could be no delay in implementing a deficit-reduction program. Referring to the raging economic crisis in Greece and the austerity measures being imposed there he said, “The bigger risk at present, given the experience of the last two weeks, would be for a new government not to put in place clear and credible measures to deal with the fiscal deficit.”

Of King’s TUC appearance the *Independent* said, “Mr King’s message is likely to be uncompromising. The Governor has in the past praised workforces for pay restraint and for working with employers to minimise the impact of the downturn on employment.”

The change in tone towards the trade unions between the previous Conservative Party government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and John Major between 1979 and 1997 is significant. Thatcher above all was noted for her caustic and confrontational stance towards the unions and her imposition of anti-union legislation curtailing the right to strike.

The TUC’s response was to prostrate itself before the dictates of the ruling class and do everything possible to demobilise and betray the struggles waged by the working class against the Tories. This was signalled by their abandonment of even formal opposition to the anti-union laws in 1983, which paved the way for its isolating of the year long miners’ strike of 1984-85, allowing the Tories to impose the most devastating defeat suffered by the British working class since the 1926 General Strike.

It is now more than a quarter of a century during which the unions have functioned nakedly as a loyal appendage of corporate management and the government, in ensuring a virtual absence of any major industrial struggle. Indeed one has to be over 50 years of age in order to remember anything that could be genuinely described as a successful major strike.

Following the election of the “New Labour” government in 1997, the unions simply continued where they left off under the Tories. They colluded with Prime Minister Tony Blair even as he retained every last clause of the anti-union laws, presided over the largest increase in the gap between the rich and poor in history. This is the real content of “Labour’s base in the mass organisations of the working class” invoked by the fake left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party to justify their continued support for this right-wing bourgeois party and its pro-capitalist yellow union backers.

Today the union bosses are offering the same service to

Cameron that they extended to Thatcher, Major, Blair and Gordon Brown. They do so as the coalition is setting out to impose attacks that dwarf those carried out in the Thatcher era. As *Financial Times* commentator Alex Barker noted, if one wants to understand the scale of the spending cuts (up to 40 percent) that are to be carried out under the coalition government, it should be compared to the Thatcher administration where total public spending actually rose in real terms by 1.1 percent a year across her premiership.

The trade unions will inevitably pay a heavy political price for their collaboration. Commenting on the collusion between the government and the TUC, the *Independent* leader hailed “This engagement” which “can only be to the good”. It added, “those TUC leaders who say they are keen to deal with the Coalition rather than confront it are to be applauded” and warned that the “country would be ill-served” by “hostile stand-offs” of previous eras.

“This Government has an electoral mandate for cuts of significant degree”, it insisted.

This is of course a lie. Only in ruling circles and amongst the trade union apparatus is such a mandate accepted. Millions of working people will be forced to fight the government’s programme of mass austerity, unemployment and the destruction of the welfare state tooth and nail. And this will bring them into direct confrontation with the trade unions, which act as a fifth column in policing austerity and cuts. To safeguard and advance their interests working people will need to build new, popular and truly democratic organisations of the rank and file which exclude all representatives of the trade union bureaucracy.



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