

Britain's trade unions and the ex-left

Robert Stevens
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This year's British Trades Union Congress (TUC) was not just one more example of the treachery of the union bureaucracy. In the face of the most devastating onslaught against the working class in Britain since the 1930s, including tens of billions of pounds in public spending cuts, the TUC proposed no opposition whatsoever.

All that was agreed by the delegates at its Manchester event was an October 19 "rally" inside Central Hall in Westminster, London, to mark the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's public spending review, and a "national demonstration" to be held some time in March next year.

During the congress, the right-wing media claimed that the occasional resort to militant rhetoric by union bosses such as the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) leader Bob Crow signified that the TUC was preparing to organise mass opposition.

One of the more sober representatives of the corporate media took the true measure of the congress and pointed to the clear intention of the trade unions to collaborate with the attacks of the government and corporate management. A September 17 comment by John Lloyd in the *Financial Times* drew attention to the comment by John Monks. Lloyd wrote, "This week, at the TUC, the leader of the European union federation, John Monks, a former TUC general secretary, told the Congress that 'Influence in the boardroom will be better than influence on the picket line as a guide to trade union strategy in the future'."

"Intriguingly, this may fit with the coalition government's stated intention to have a 'partnership' with the unions—though the details are vague," Lloyd wrote. "It doesn't look like the start of either a discontented winter, or a hot autumn."

The unions today are not "workers' organisations" in any sense. They no longer function as reformist, defensive organisations of the working class. Rather

they are working to destroy every gain won in struggles going back more than a century and have presided over an historic deterioration in the social position of the working class. They function openly as an arm of management and in every country play the same role in working with governments to implement the most vicious attacks on workers' jobs, wages and conditions.

But not only sections of the tabloid media are claiming that the TUC, which has not led any serious protest, let alone strike action, in the last 30 years, is ready and eager to storm the citadels of capital. This position finds its echo amongst rightward moving middle class political groups in the UK such as the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party.

A September 14 *Socialist Worker* article declared, "TUC shifts left as fury at Tory cuts deepens."

"TUC annual conference in Manchester called for coordinated industrial action against the cuts. And, importantly, it has called a national demonstration for next March", it declared.

"Union leader after union leader dubbed the government's planned cuts 'obscene', 'reckless' and 'lunacy', pledging the 'fight of our lives' against a 'demolition government,'" reported the SWP.

The Socialist Party's account of the TUC was just as unabashed in its servility to the left-talking bureaucrats. It is supporting an October 23 indoor rally being held by several trade unions at Congress House, the headquarters of the TUC, and is calling for a lobby of the TUC that day by "all trade unionists" to demand "the immediate organisation of a national demonstration".

"Failure by the TUC to respond to this pressure must then lead to the NSSN [National Shop Stewards Network] together with the left trade unions calling the demonstration themselves", it continues.

The SP knows only too well that the union bureaucracy will not countenance any concerted or

serious action against the government, admitting that TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber had, at the Congress, “ruled out immediate measures of a ‘general strike character’.” Hence its attempts to boost the credibility of the “left wing” of the union apparatus.

The SP concludes with a pledge of loyalty to the bureaucracy, stating that the NSSN, “seeks not to replace the official trade unions but acts as a lever to force them into action at the base of the unions. Decisive action organised from below and above by the unions can defeat this government.”

This statement encapsulates the role of all the fake left groups as the last line of defence for the entire trade union bureaucracy. To the extent they call for rank-and-file action, it is always limited to pressurising the existing leadership of the trade unions—hence their talk of combined pressure “from below and above”.

This is not simply the product of an incorrect appraisal of the trade unions, or even the “lefts”. The evasions and outright lies of the ex-left groups—their unswerving loyalty to the “official trade unions”—is motivated by more prosaic, selfish considerations.

Today the members of these organisations themselves constitute a large part of the union hierarchy, at both a national and local level. Many unions, particularly in the public sector, have a significant layer of ex-radicals in the highest reaches of their leadership.

The Public and Commercial Services union executive includes SWP members and is headed by Mark Serwotka, a former member of the Alliance for Workers Liberty.

Around half the seats on the UCU lecturers’ union executive are taken by the UCU Left, led mainly by the SWP. Sean Vernell, who addressed the TUC Congress, is a leading SWP member, a member of the UCU executive since 2003 and of the UCU London Regional Council. The only “protest” mounted at the TUC itself was a pathetic stunt by a few members of the UCU, including Vernell, who stood up in silence as the governor of the Bank of England addressed the conference.

PCS President Janice Godrich is a Socialist Party member and heads a large minority on its national executive. Matt Wrack, Fire Brigades Union general secretary, was formerly a member of the Socialist Party and maintains close relations.

Ensconced in these often well-paid positions,

facilitating and assisting sell-outs by the union tops, the ex-lefts have directly organised the most despicable betrayals themselves.

The NSSN is not a genuine rank-and-file movement. It is firmly under the control of the trade union bureaucracy. The SP invokes a “shop stewards network” as if there were a significant level of opposition among the lower layers of the union apparatus. But those supporting the NSSN are in the main members of the ex-left formations, the Stalinist Communist Party, or are actual trade union leaders, such as Bob Crow of the RMT who addressed their rally outside the TUC meeting.

The activity of the NSSN consists purely of calling for pressure on union bodies that their fellow party members often lead. In its founding document in 2007, the NSSN agreed it would not “encroach on the established organisation and recruitment activity or interfere in the internal affairs and elections of TUC-affiliated trade unions or the functions of the TUC.”

A crucial consideration for the ex-lefts, one which they share with their fellow bureaucrats, is to ensure that the source of their own comfortable lifestyle, including all the perks associated with trade union officialdom, is not imperilled. A recent report of trade union finances found that in 2008/09, the net assets of the trade unions was just under £1 billion (£939 million), even after falling by 17.2 percent in the first year of the global financial crisis.

The only way that workers can defend their jobs and livelihoods is by organising an insurgent movement against the trade union apparatus and the fraudulent opposition groups such as the NSSN. The urgent task facing all those who want to fight the imposition of mass austerity is the building of new organisations of class struggle, genuinely representing and fully accountable to the rank and file and based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

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