

British Labour Party's new leader pledges to support cuts and suppress strikes

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There was an unwarranted sense of relief, even euphoria, in sections of the Labour Party at the end of its annual congress.

The former Labour leader (1983-92), now Lord, Neil Kinnock enthused over the speech of the party's new leader, Ed Miliband—proclaiming it to be “magnificent”. It had, he told a *Tribune* rally, “ignited with truth, with candour, with absolute honesty what we stand for”.

“We've got our party back”, he declared. Miliband had “set us on a course to earn victory at the next election”.

There is, in fact, precious little reason for such self-congratulatory noises. Kinnock was one of Ed Miliband's main backers against his brother, David Miliband, the favoured candidate of the Blairite wing of the party. However, the elder Miliband was defeated by just one percent of the vote and won amongst both party members and parliamentarians. Ed Miliband owed his victory to the major trade unions that backed him and delivered 60 percent of the mere ten percent of union members who bothered to vote.

This is hardly a ringing endorsement. It means that a substantial section of the party was not prepared to make any attempt to distance themselves from the Blair years. They constitute Labour's equivalent of the “No Turning Back” group in the Conservative Party—formed to preserve the political legacy of Margaret Thatcher—but with much greater influence.

David Miliband resigned from front-line politics immediately after the congress, declaring that this would end the “soap opera” of the fratricidal conflict with Ed and allow the party to unite. But if unity is to be achieved, then it will only be to the extent that Ed Miliband demonstrates that his supposed break with the past is for the most part merely rhetorical and does not impinge on Labour's central big business agenda.

In this regard, Ed Miliband did not disappoint. His first speech as leader contained pledges for change, but little of substance to suggest any would be implemented. He

represented a “new generation” that would run the party with “different attitudes, different ideas, different ways of doing politics”. Labour must “shed old thinking”. He also hinted at his opposition to Labour's most criminal actions associated above all with the Iraq war. Labour had appeared “casual” about civil liberties and he would not let the Tories or Liberal Democrats “take ownership of the British tradition of liberty”. The party's foreign policy should be “based on values, not just alliances”.

It was his statement on Iraq that provoked a reaction. In an attempt to placate his colleagues, he reassured the conference, “I criticise nobody faced with making the toughest of decisions and I honour our troops who fought and died there”, but he added that “I do believe that we were wrong. Wrong to take Britain to war”.

His brother, who was foreign secretary, was filmed by the BBC speaking to deputy party leader Harriet Harman, criticising her for applauding this statement. He asked her, “You voted for it, why are you clapping?” Others, including Alistair Darling, Jack Straw and Andy Burnham demonstrably did not applaud.

The issue is explosive for them, bound up as it is with the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan and raising once again the demand for criminal prosecutions of the war's architects. This ensured that Ed Miliband's reassurances of support for the Afghan war and refusal to apportion blame did not placate anyone.

A BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme interviewer took up the theme of Miliband's internal opponents, noting that his “opposition” to the Iraq war had been an exceedingly private affair. Miliband claimed in his defence that he could not have spoken out more strongly because, “I was in government and part of a collective responsibility”.

This is, naturally, a flat-out lie. In 2003, Ed Miliband was studying at Harvard University in the United States. He did not even become an MP until 2005.

Miliband feels he must skate on thin ice here if Labour is to have any chance of restoring a measure of popular support. The same is true of his semi-critical comments on

Labour's economic policy.

He praised Labour for its achievements in office, spuriously claiming that Britain was now “fairer and stronger than it was 13 years ago” as a result. But Labour had also been “naïve” regarding regulation of financial markets, leading to voter anger “at a Labour government that claimed it could end boom and bust”.

He supported “a living wage” that would be higher than the current minimum wage and said he was also for an increase in the £2 billion annual bank levy due to come into force in January. This was so that “the people who caused the crisis” could help pay for “the services and entitlements on which families depend”.

Even here, Miliband's prescriptions took on a reactionary hue, as he framed his defence of a living wage as opposition to increased immigration from Europe, which he blamed for undercutting wages.

But that, as they say, was that. The rest of Miliband's speech was dedicated to reassuring the party that Labour under his leadership would remain the friend and ally of the City of London and big business.

The three main sound bites written into his speech kicked off with the declaration, delivered to wild applause: “Red Ed? Come off it!” This was the answer to the pro-Tory press that claimed his victory would push the party to the left.

Secondly, he pledged to be a “responsible” opposition leader, committed to fiscal prudence and sensible deficit reduction. His disagreement with the government was over whether too hasty cuts would plunge the economy into a second recession. But, “There will be cuts and there would have been if we had been in government”, he added. “I won’t oppose every cut the coalition proposes”.

What this means is that Labour will support most, if not all, the cuts the present government proposes. And when it is forced to issue a formal protest as part of its politicking, this will only be as part of an effort to ensure that no genuine opposition to the coalition government is mounted.

Former chancellor, Alistair Darling, who is stepping down from Labour's front bench, told the conference that Labour cannot “ignore the deficit”. It should support his plans to halve the deficit in four years as opposed to the government's intention to eliminate it altogether in five years. Miliband has said Darling's plans were “a starting point”.

The third and central pledge made by Miliband on Labour's behalf, one that workers must take particular note of, is his promise that he would have “no truck with overblown rhetoric about waves of irresponsible strikes”. Addressing the assembled heads of Britain's trade unions, he said, “The public won’t support them. I won’t support them. And you shouldn’t support them either”.

This is the message that the assembled delegates and trade union tops wanted to hear just as eagerly as the heads of the major corporations and the bankers.

Derek Simpson, the joint general secretary of Britain's largest union, Unite, hailed Miliband's speech as one “worthy of the next prime minister”. Labour would need an economic plan, rather than just opposition to the cuts, he said. He was “with Ed Miliband” that Labour could not guarantee there would be no job losses but “along with the restraint on public spending there will be a strategy for growth”.

Miliband’s election, the conference pledge to oppose “obscene” cuts, and the distance Labour is now seeking to put between itself and its years in office are considered to be survival mechanisms—by the trade union leaders, above all. Not only are they well aware of the fact, pointed out by Miliband in his speech, that the party lost five million votes between 1997 and 2010. More important still, their every waking hour is spent in the knowledge that they are sitting on a social powder keg.

Official Labour-speak now constantly stresses that the “public” is broadly supportive of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition's cuts and to oppose them would only engender further alienation from the party and the trade unions. But the union leaders know different. A well of anger is building up that must, of necessity, take on explosive forms once the full impact of the cuts become clear.

None other than Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper commissioned a poll that found Labour was now one point ahead of the Tories as a result of public disquiet over the cuts. This most right wing but populist of publications has even launched a week-long series on the social impact of the cuts, under the heading “The Public Sack-tor”.

In the event of mass opposition, it will be Labour's task and that of the trade unions to quell it and, if necessary, even form a new government to impose them should the Tories fail. Miliband's speech and the support he received from the union leaders, is a pledge to capital that the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress is ready and willing to do just that.



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