

Conservative leader holds “constructive dialogue” with Britain’s union bosses

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British Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron met with members of the executive committee of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) on Monday, for tea and mince pies.

A Downing Street spokesman said the “good-natured” talks were aimed at engaging in “constructive dialogue” with the trade unions, emphasising that Cameron was “keen to work with organised labour”.

Union leaders described the talks as “historic”—the first official meeting between a Conservative leader and such a high-level trade union delegation for 25 years. The attempt to portray the trade unions as non gratae is bogus.

TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber, who headed the delegation, sits on the Bank of England’s Court of Directors, while newspapers reported that previous talks have been held between the unions and “lower ranking ministers since the coalition was formed in May”. Indeed, the TUC invited Cameron to address its annual conference in September but the prime minister declined the offer at the time, stating that he expected to be on paternity leave.

Nonetheless, there is more than symbolism involved in the return to high-profile, official discussions. The last time such talks were held with a Conservative leader was in 1985 between then TUC General Secretary Norman Willis and Margaret Thatcher at the end of the miners’ strike.

Whereas that meeting came after the Labour Party and the TUC had isolated and betrayed the year-long strike, these latest talks are preparation for trade union efforts to sabotage a broader offensive against the coalition government.

They took place against the backdrop of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government’s £83 billion austerity package. Launched in October, the

spending cuts will see 330,000 jobs lost in the public sector, an extension of a pay-freeze and higher pension contributions, in addition to the running down of essential social provision and welfare. In the last three months alone, some 40,000 public sector workers have been laid off, with no opposition from the trade unions.

It is particularly significant that the discussions took place after student protests that took the National Union of Students, the official parties and the trade unions completely by surprise. In the last month, demonstrations by students, school-children and academics against the attacks on further education have been subject to brutal attacks by riot police.

The government and the TUC share a common concern—how to dissipate growing anger at measures that will devastate the living standards and social conditions of millions. As the *Financial Times* noted, “both sides [are] seeking to quell mounting tensions over the government’s austerity drive”.

Emerging from the meeting, Barber said he had warned Cameron of a “bleak midwinter” for many working people, and had expressed the unions’ “fundamental disagreement” with the government on what he politely termed its “decision to focus on reducing the deficit.” But he welcomed “useful discussions” on “green growth and jobs”, as well as Cameron’s intention to “continue this dialogue” with unions on matters such as public sector pensions.

The talks put in context an article by Len McCluskey, head of Unite—Britain’s largest union, in the *Guardian* on December 19.

Under the heading “Unions, get set for battle”, McCluskey talked tough. The “magnificent students’ movement” had “put the trade union movement on the spot”, he said. The response of the trade unions “will now be critical”. “[W]e have to be preparing for

battle”, he continued. “It is our responsibility not just to our members but to the wider society that we defend our welfare state and our industrial future against this unprecedented assault.”

Amidst all the hot air, however, McCluskey’s call to “battle” amounts to nothing concrete. In January, the TUC would hold a “special meeting to discuss co-ordinated industrial action”, he said, before warning that “Thatcher’s anti-union laws” presented “practical and legal hurdles” to strike action that “cannot be dismissed”.

Other than that meaningless pledge, all the Unite leader offered was a TUC demonstration planned for March 26, some 10 months after the coalition came into office.

McCluskey welcomed new Labour Party leader Ed Miliband’s “course of drawing a line under Labour’s Blairite past.” And he warned pointedly, “These are Con-Dem cuts, and this is a capitalist crisis. An attempt to blame Labour local authorities for the problem is a shortcut to splitting our movement and letting the government off the hook.”

McCluskey was reportedly unable to attend the talks with Cameron due to “adverse weather conditions”. His article was made necessary by concern that such friendly discussions between the government and the TUC would further erode the already tattered credentials of the trade unions.

This is especially the case after McCluskey provided the star-turn at the misnamed Coalition of Resistance (CoR) launch meeting in November, formed by long-time Labour stalwart Tony Benn and Britain’s pseudo-left groups.

Under the guise of “civil disobedience” and protest, CoR hopes to provide the trade unions with the fig-leaf of opposition to spending cuts, so as to direct the growing anger of millions into the suffocating embrace of the TUC. Its launch conference was aimed at mobilising the fake-left groups as foot soldiers for the March TUC demonstration, under conditions in which the trade unions themselves are hostile to anything that smacks remotely of a challenge to the government and its austerity measures. That is why McCluskey referenced CoR in his *Guardian* article.

The Unite leader’s support for Miliband was not returned, however. Far from breaking with Labour’s right-wing course, in his first speech as party leader

Miliband pointedly denounced the possibility of “irresponsible strikes” against the government’s cuts.

Responding to McCluskey’s article, a spokesperson for Miliband said, “Ed warned about using overblown rhetoric about strikes in his conference speech and this is a case in point. The language and tone of Len McCluskey’s comments are wrong and unhelpful and Ed Miliband will be making that clear when he meets him in the near future.”

McCluskey’s statements were also attacked by the *Guardian* in an editorial. In language redolent of Thatcher, the nominally liberal newspaper portrayed the Unite leader, and any prospect of industrial action, as relics of the past.

The “majority of the population” agrees with the need for a “publicly funded state”, “an industrial future” and “free—and better—trade unions,” it opined. “But the public does not want an unreformed welfare state, a lame duck industrial sector or trade unions that seem more concerned with overthrowing governments than representing workers’ interests democratically.”

While there may be “millions ... [who] feel threatened by cuts”, they “accept that sacrifices have to be made (and shared fairly)”, “approve” of the anti-union laws, and “are not excited by battling the police or a new wave of strikes.”



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