# Coalition of Resistance pledges loyalty to Labour and trade union bureaucracy

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No one organisation can "profess to be the leadership of the anti-cuts campaign and anyone who does should be punished." So warned the Socialist Workers Party's Chris Bambery at Saturday's closing rally of the Coalition of Resistance.

The CoR was launched in the *Guardian* newspaper on August 4 by Tony Benn, the octogenarian British Labourite and one-time government minister. Billed as "a broad movement of active resistance" to the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition's austerity measures, it was backed by 73 signatories, including just two Labour MPs and a clutch of trade union leaders.

The CoR's objective, Benn stated, would be to "campaign for a radical alternative, with the level of determination shown by trade unionists and social movements in Greece and other European countries."

This statement, as the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, marked Benn's campaign as a fraud and a diversion from a genuine struggle against the unprecedented assault on jobs, wages, living standards and social provision being carried through across Europe. (See "A fraudulent 'coalition of resistance' in Britain")

In Greece, France, Spain, Portugal and elsewhere, the limited protests and strikes organised by the trade unions have not halted a single one of the austerity measures being implemented in these countries. This is because while Europe's ruling elites will brook no compromise in implementing the class-war agenda demanded by the international financial oligarchy, they also know they can rely on the collusion of the trade union bureaucracy.

Europe's trade unions function as part of the state apparatuses and as loyal defenders of the capitalist system. Should they organise the occasional protest, it is solely to let off steam and politically trap the working class behind social democratic parties that either support austerity measures or, in the case of Greece, Spain and Portugal, are implementing them.

"If Benn's 'coalition of resistance' involves any resistance at all", the WSWS wrote, "it will be resistance to an independent movement of workers".

It is in this context that Bambery's extraordinary outburst must be understood.

In the six months since the government announced it would impose the most draconian cuts in public spending since the 1930s, the trade unions have not lifted a finger in opposition. Tens of thousands of workers are being laid off, wages frozen and cut, unemployment benefits and social provision slashed. Yet the Unite and Unison trade unions—the two largest in Britain—blocked calls for a token protest march to coincide with the government's austerity budget in October. All the Trades Union Congress has agreed to is a demonstration next spring, on March 26.

Benn and his coterie were entirely in agreement with such a timetable. They waited three months between the issuing of their call for "resistance" and the official launch of the CoR so as not to disrupt September's TUC and Labour Party conferences. With Ed Miliband safely installed as Labour leader, the CoR rally was intended to help revive the tattered credibility of the Labour Party and the TUC by associating it, however tenuously, with an "oppositional" movement.

Events, however, intervened. In the first place, the global economic situation has deteriorated rapidly. Emboldened by the trillion-dollar bank bailouts of 2008, the financial elite have come back for more—threatening the bankruptcy of entire countries and the pauperisation of their populations.

Into this mix has been thrown the outbreak of protests against the attacks on education by young, predominantly working class students and school pupils in the UK, which have taken the government, the trade unions and their political apologists by surprise. Denounced by the ruling establishment, the media and the National Union of Students, and subject to brutal police attack, the protests are an anticipation of broader social and political unrest, under conditions in which all the official, parliamentary avenues for expressing discontent have been closed down.

Lindsey German, the former SWP leader who now leads a split-off called Counterfire and functions as CoR spokesperson, told the rally, "The students have changed the political situation." What she meant was that they were a warning that the pseudo-left had to get its act together, if the trade unions and the Labour Party are to establish their stranglehold over an increasingly rebellious and incipient anti-capitalist social movement.

It is to facilitate this that the CoR presents itself as a "grassroots" organisation, supposedly without ties to any particular party or political agenda, other than opposition to the government's cuts.

As always, this meant that the representatives of Britain's fake-left outfits hid their political affiliations behind the various fronts they have established: the SWP's "Right to Work" campaign, the TUC-Stalinist-backed "People's Charter", etc. There may be disputes between the tendencies involved: John Rees (Counterfire) responded to Bambery's injunctive by insisting that the CoR was "*the* movement"—a warning to the SWP that it must fall into line. But such factional differences are without principle. All are agreed to act the loyal lieutenants of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy.

This was accompanied by equally standard demands for participants to "leave their sectarian baggage" at the door, in the interests of "unity".

What this means is that socialists must keep silent, so as to ensure "unity" with the Labour Party, trade unions, Greens and disaffected Liberal Democrats. Only the Labour-supporting union bureaucrats and their ilk are to be allowed to parade their discredited political affiliations openly. Otherwise they would jump ship from the CoR at the first sign of any genuine opposition to the capitalist profit system.

The CoR's founding declaration does not even commit to a fight to bring down the coalition government. Rather, its "aim is to force the ConDem government to abandon its cuts programme". Thus, the "whirlwind of activity" pledged by the CoR is, in the words of Rachel Newton for the Peoples Charter, aimed at "hammering away at the cracks in the coalition". In other words, the CoR hopes to build alliances with

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Liberal Democrats who fear their party's anti-austerity measures have destroyed its credibility, but who are not prepared to jeopardise its place in government.

The major plank of the CoR's declaration is to build for the March 26 TUC national demonstration. Their services are needed by the bureaucracy. As Newton admitted, the "days have long gone where the TUC could call everyone together". This is especially the case under conditions where the trade unions are facilitating the austerity measures.

Mark Serwotka, leader of the PCS civil service union, admitted that he had just returned from the Welsh TUC conference where "after two and a half hours of discussion, there was no mention of strikes, or of how to resist" the cuts. Nor was anything said about the fact that two local authorities had just issued redundancy notices to their 18,000 employees. This admission caused not a ripple. Rather, Serwotka's insistence that it was precisely such inactivity on the part of the trade unions that necessitated a "grassroots movement" to build for March 26 was greeted enthusiastically.

Why should workers and youth look for opposition to organisations that are so patently hostile to any mobilising? Neither Serwotka, nor his audience, are remotely interested in addressing this blatant contradiction.

All this is covered over with calls for mass protests, civil disobedience, and the like. Noises that the trade union leaders on the platform were only to willing to go along with, so long as it doesn't imply doing anything on their part.

Bob Crow, leader of the Rail Maritime and Transport union, told the rally it was "no good talking about what kind of social system we want if we can't get rid of this government". But Crow isn't in the business of getting "rid" of the coalition. He was speaking after having spent three days in talks at the arbitration service, ACAS, trying to call off a strike by London Underground workers against job cuts—talks that failed only due to management intransigence.

Len McCluskey was an unadvertised addition to the speakers' platform. The CoR organisers no doubt considered his appearance a coup, coming just days after he had won the leadership of the Unite trade union. As it is, his electoral success only underscores the extent to which the trade unions are hollowed-out, bureaucratic shells. Just 16 percent of Unite members voted, of which 42 percent supported McCluskey—i.e., 7 percent of all union members.

McCluskey is a ferociously loyal Labourite, who has denounced anyone arguing for an alternative to Labour for "retreating into a fantasy world." The way the wind is blowing, however, he has declared himself in favour of an "alliance of resistance" that will "rock the establishment". At the CoR rally, he made great play of the need to "build the anger". Interviewed a few days earlier in the *Guardian*, he declared that the law was not "sacrosanct". Citing Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi and the Suffragettes, he said it was a "duty" to oppose "bad laws".

What "bad laws" will McCluskey break? Not the anti-union laws for starters. While encouraging students, pupils and others in a campaign of "civil disobedience", he made clear he would not organise any strike action against the cuts that might jeopardise his union's assets and his own comfortable sinecure. "I have got no intention of playing the bosses' game of being dragged into cul-de-sacs and courts, and having to be fined by courts with our members' money," he said.

What then is Unite's role in the "resistance"? "There is an anger building up the likes of which we have not seen in our country since the poll tax", McCluskey told the *Guardian*, "so it is the responsibility of the trades unions more than anyone else to give some guidance to that anger and put it in a manner that will hopefully make the government take a step back."

McCluskey pledged his backing to Miliband and the Labour Party. Similarly, John McDonnell MP, one of a handful of Labour "lefts", appealed at the CoR rally for Miliband to show his face on the TUC demonstration.

Where is all this heading? A striking absence from the meeting was any discussion on the global dimension of the economic catastrophe now unfolding. To the extent that events in Europe rated a mention, it was only to cite numbers on demonstrations. Just one "international" speaker was present, Christian Mahieux, of the Solidaires trade union in France. In the last months, France has seen significant protests and strikes against the Sarkozy government's attack on pensions. Hundreds of thousands of workers and youth were involved in demonstrations and strikes, and, in October, a highly effective port and oil strike paralysed the country.

As is to be expected, Mahieux glorified the role of the trade unions in opposing the attack on pensions by the Sarkozy government. The great strength of this fight, he claimed, was that "all the French unions were united against the government".

Unfortunately, "We have lost the struggle", he continued, as the pension reform has passed into law. How was this possible? Because the unions would not agree to call for a general strike, and refused "to extend the call for strikes in oil refineries and rail into other areas", he said.

Trade union "unity" consisted precisely of isolating and sabotaging the workers' offensive, so as to facilitate the austerity measures of the French bourgeoisie.

The absence of international speakers is only partially accounted for by the fact that an addressing of events in Europe would threaten to expose the bankruptcy of CoR's policy. Newton told the rally that the bank bailouts proved claims that "we can't stop the flow of capital around the world through our national institutions" were "wrong". Constant references were made to the 1945 post-war Labour government and its programme of limited national reforms. This was served up as a defence of Britain's "welfare state" as if the last 30 years of neo-liberal assault by Labour and Conservative alike had never happened.

The CoR should "engender the spirit of 1945", said film director Ken Loach when "we won the war together" and "took over major industries together".

McCluskey went further, asking how it could be that British workers who had "saved Europe from fascism and won the rights other European workers enjoy for them", now had "worse rights than German, Italian and Spanish workers".

For the CoR and its constituent parts, the global economic crisis is not the basis for unifying the international working class to put an end to the profit system. Rather, it provides an opportunity to reassert the viability of the capitalist nation-state—as a means of regulating both the economy and the class struggle—and thereby preserving the social interests of the petty bourgeois stratum represented by the pseudo-left.

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