

Why does Britain's Guardian insist there is mass support for austerity and cuts?

Robert Stevens
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Britain's *Guardian* newspaper has responded to the March 26 half-million strong Trades Union Congress (TUC) demonstration against the government's £100 billion austerity programme with barely concealed hostility.

Due to the refusal of the unions to call a single significant strike or protest of any note for nearly a year, this was the first opportunity for working people in Britain to voice their hostility to the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's agenda. It demonstrated that the TUC has been sitting on a well of pent-up rage that must inevitably find explosive political expression.

The *Guardian* has chosen as its mission to mount an ideological offensive with the modest aim of painting black as white—insisting that the majority of the population support cuts and that the worst possible mistake that can be made by the Labour Party and the TUC is to side themselves with an unrepresentative minority.

While virtually every other opinion poll to date has shown a majority of people opposed to the austerity measures of the government, a *Guardian*/ICM poll published the day before the demonstration somehow contrived to find overall support for the government.

An article by arch Tory *Guardian* columnist Julian Glover declared, "Despite Saturday's protest march in London, public tolerance of cuts seems to be sustained. Only 35% think the plans go too far—a 10-point drop since ICM asked the question in November. Meanwhile 28% think the government has found the right balance and 29% say the cuts are not severe enough. That amounts to 57% support for current cuts or more."

The day after the march, the *Guardian*'s Sunday sister paper, the *Observer*, opined, "Protest is fine. Now for a proper debate."

"Hundreds of thousands marched through London to protest against the coalition plans", it wrote, "but we have yet to see a viable alternative to these austerity measures ... a mass show of affection does not bring the opposition any closer to a sustainable funding model for public services."

"There is no serious dispute about the need to bring the

deficit down, only about the best timetable", it continued. "At the moment, on the vital matter of public sector reform, the coalition agenda is pretty much the only game in town".

On March 28, the *Guardian* continued the theme. The outpouring of opposition witnessed on the TUC march was at odds with the finding of its poll, which revealed that "57% think the cuts strike the right balance or don't go far enough."

The *Guardian* has the temerity to assert that its poll accurately reflects the views of the "silent majority", faithfully echoing the line of the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph*'s Simon Heffer, who countered to the protest, "Although the census returns have yet to be counted, we have approximately 62 million people in this country, 61,750,000 of whom did not march on Saturday."

The TUC afforded pride of place on its platform to Labour Party leader Ed Miliband, in a desperate effort to restore its vanished reputation as an opposition to the government. Miliband duly used the occasion to argue against unrealistic expectations that either Labour or the TUC would oppose the government. "There is a need for difficult choices, and some cuts", he insisted.

This was not enough for Jackie Ashley, who wrote that Miliband's "real job, Labour's real job, is to be building the alternative government plan that will satisfy international opinion and preserve the UK's creditworthiness, and will reduce the deficit on a different trajectory."

Michael White, writing on March 29, also rolled out the ICM poll to insist that 29 percent of those surveyed "want even more blood on the Treasury carpet." The alternative proposed by the "reality-based community" of Miliband and TUC moderates amounted to "an unheroic 'not so fast' to the pace of tax rises and spending cuts".

To those trade union bureaucrats who made militant-sounding speeches on the TUC platform in order to cover their backs, White cautioned that the ICM poll proved there was "Not much of a mandate there for mass strikes against the cuts, let alone to protect public sector pensions, which can look pretty good to outsiders..."

The “voters know they are dealing with ~~moderate~~ ~~the~~ the working class for the absence of strike action, coalition obduracy”, he added, and “will judge (Conservative Chancellor) George Osborne by what he does to secure our collective economic future, not by cuts to SureStart and library provision, however painful”, White claimed.

To reinforce its no-struggle message, the *Guardian* hosted a “business podcast” on its web site March 30 to “discuss the role of trade unions in the debate on cuts, growth and unemployment”.

Featured were columnist Polly Toynbee and Ian Brinkley of the Work Foundation think tank, who was previously a long-time researcher and economist for the TUC. The Work Foundation’s guiding figure is Will Hutton, the former editor of the *Observer*, who is now an adviser to the coalition government.

Unison Assistant General Secretary Bob Abberley dutifully insisted that “at this stage it’s a bit early to talk about large-scale strikes”. Instead, Britain’s largest public sector union, with more than 1.3 million members, would be “campaigning at local level” and nationally “trying to change a government policy”.

When asked if strikes were the best way to oppose the “savage cuts” being made, Toynbee insisted, “No. It’s almost the worst if you want to protect public services that you work in.”

It was particularly off limits to wage any struggle against those Labour councils imposing the cuts. Citing teachers, then striking against Labour-controlled Camden council, she declared, “But Camden is a Labour council. Camden has to make appalling cuts and terrible decisions.”

Brinkley joined the chorus. “I don’t sense a great appetite for people going on strike at the moment. People have got enough problems without also going out on strike”, he said.

Brinkley aptly summed up the role of the trade unions, as he understands it very well from personal experience. “It’s always been the historic role of the TUC to be accused of selling out the working class. Ever since the day it was formed, it has performed that historic role. This is no different”, he said.

Brinkley was just as clear regarding those supposed left union leaders calling on the TUC to organise strike action: “The public service unions are not particularly good at coordinating strike action across their own members let alone trying to get the TUC to do it”, he said. “And they’ll use the TUC as cover to advocate policies that they know do not have widespread support across the trade union movement. So it’s just the TUC fulfilling its historic role as being the whipping boys for voices advocating actions they know are not going to happen.”

Brinkley’s comments are cynical and self-serving. He still

rather than the bureaucracy. But he is right as to the pantomime character of the “left talkers” when they call on the TUC leaders to organise opposition when their only intention is to betray any struggle that emerges. It is to this bureaucracy that the *Guardian*’s message is in part directed. Its advice is for the trade union and Labour leaders to avoid any talk that may raise expectations in the working class and risk sparking a movement that, despite their best efforts and intentions, could get out of their control.

To the same end the *Guardian* is also acting as an opinion-former, speaking directly to its readership. First there is the narrow, well-paid, upper middle class layer—people who share the cosseted existence of Toynbee and company—who will agree with their unabashed apologetics for austerity and attacks on working people. But more important is the broader layer that looks to the *Guardian* for an alternative to the right-wing press—many of whom are employed in education, the caring professions and other public services facing draconian cuts.

Usually disappointed in what they find, and almost invariably leaning further to the left than their chosen news source, this is the audience being subjected to wretched propaganda designed to convince them that nothing can be done and there is no alternative to austerity. The message to them all is, “You may want to strike, to fight back, but just look at the *Guardian*’s sacred opinion poll, read its respected columnists and realise how out of step with public opinion you are!”



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