

An exchange on “Reject TUC’s phoney war”

21 April 2011

Below we publish correspondence on the SEP statement on the Trades Union Congress March 26 demonstration in London, entitled “Reject TUC’s phoney war.”

Your urge for us to reject TUC’s phoney war is not backed up by facts.

You say the TUC have not organised a significant strike. There have been rolling 1-day tube strikes, postal workers strikes, and others. Democracy requires the level of the strike to be determined by the membership. It is our experience, which decides it—you claim to be democratic.

You say the TUC is negotiating with Bankers and MPs in the Coalition. Only by consulting with them will we be in a position to see ahead and be able to counter it.

You say working people must split from the Labour Party and Unions.

These are our only safety at present! If we split from them what will we have instead? SEP has next to no following. Why not join the Labour Party/Unions and try to swing opinion towards your theories?

Finally you say we should prepare for the fight back.

What is your plan of action? How to fight without a Union or Political Party? It is political suicide!

You speak of being “trapped” in a Union.

It is those who don’t join unions that are trapped! They have nowhere to turn when they are laid off. Union members can call on comrades for protection and justice.

What is the alternative? Split the Unions, split the Labour Party and settle for no compromises: be a Party of minority and no power. What equality is that?

Ruth Appleton

Co-ordinator Santé Refugee Mental Health Access Project

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Dear Ruth,

You are angered by the refusal of the Socialist Equality Party to line up behind the TUC and Labour Party. This is a defining issue which separates the SEP and its fight for an international and socialist program and the political independence of the working class from all the fake-left groups.

The core of your argument is that outside the framework of the Labour Party and the unions it is impossible to develop a movement in opposition to the cuts. The Labour Party and the unions are workers’ “only safety at present”, you write, and without them any fight back is “political suicide”.

The opposite is the case. There is no way forward within these organisations. Any effort by working people to defend their jobs and living standards requires a political and organisational rebellion against them.

The Labour Party and trade unions have broken with the working class. They no longer defend even the most basic and immediate interests of working people and have openly aligned themselves with demands of the corporations and financial elite. This is why the working class has until now been unable to mount an effective challenge to the coalition government and its implementation of the most severe austerity measures since the 1930s.

Our judgement on the Labour Party and the TUC is not based solely upon the last 10 months, but their evolution over an entire period. The trade unions’ refusal to mobilise any genuine opposition to the cuts is of a piece with the role they have played in betraying and isolating every single struggle of the working class over the last three decades since the 1984-5 miners strike.

It is, moreover, an international phenomenon. Over the last year, we have seen the imposition of draconian austerity measures in Greece, Ireland, Spain and Portugal. In every case, the trade unions have acted to restrict the class struggle and facilitate the policies of the various national governments—many of them nominally “socialist”—the International Monetary Fund and the European Union.

Your attempt to refute the statement’s claim that the TUC has failed to organise a single significant strike against the cuts and the coalition government falls flat. You refer to the postal disputes, which took place two years ago against a Labour government. The only dispute to have developed since the coalition government came to power is on London underground.

What unites both struggles was their isolation and betrayal by

the trade unions.

The unions sanctioned official action only in face of bitter anger amongst workers, and in order to control and sell out these struggles. The Communications Workers Union (CWU) finally called national strike action after months of walkouts and strikes at the local level, having been inundated with demands from the branches. It called off the strike and imposed a no strike agreement while negotiating behind the backs of its members. The outcome was the “Business Transformation 2010 and Beyond” agreement, which accepted mail and sorting office closures and a deterioration of pay and conditions.

On the London underground, the RMT and TSSA organised the most ineffective form of strike action—a series of one day stoppages—aimed at pressuring management and Tory London Mayor Boris Johnson to back down on 800 job cuts. The TUC passed a motion in support of the dispute at its annual conference last September, which was worthless. The drivers union ASLEF endorsed it even as it organised its members to keep working throughout the stoppages. Needless to say, the job losses are now under way.

The TUC national demonstration on March 26 was a token protest, behind which the unions cover their collaboration with the cuts on a daily basis. The Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party, et al signed up to it and promoted it as the way forward.

Meanwhile, throughout the country Labour councils act no differently than Tory and Liberal Democrats in taking the axe to vital social services and jobs. And even when thousands of council workers have been issued dismissal notices unless they sign contracts based on inferior pay and conditions, the major unions such as the GMB, UNITE and UNISON do nothing.

You blame this on union members, claiming, “Democracy requires the level of the strike to be determined by the membership.” I suggest that few but the naïve and the corrupt would recognise such a rosy presentation of inner-union democracy.

These are organisations run by well-paid careerists who are utterly indifferent and hostile to workers’ interests. All they care about is preserving their comfortable relations with the employers and the government—built up over decades—at the price of suppressing any effective fight-back.

The unions are not instruments of the class struggle. They are instruments for the suppression of the class struggle.

You uncritically defend every action of the TUC, up to and including its deepening collaboration with the Bank of England and its Governor Mervyn King, claiming that the TUC is heading up some sort of factfinding mission so as to better prepare the fight against the cuts. They are meeting to collaborate against the working class and everyone involved knows this. TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber is a non-executive director of the Court of the Bank of England. That is why he admits to fighting a “phoney war” for the past ten months.

To claim that the Labour Party can be swung behind a

socialist programme is fantasy. This has been the formally declared mission of the pseudo-left groups who are either buried away in the Labour Party or have been in its political orbit for decades. Meanwhile, millions of working people have decided Labour is not for them, but for the super-rich. It has been haemorrhaging members for years. You ask us to join what is already a sinking ship.

Labour disavowed its reformist policies with the ditching of Clause IV and became the party that was, in the words of Peter Mandelson, “intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich”. Its record in over 13 years in office was to oversee growing social inequality and to wage illegal wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq. This is the reason that it has seen its membership halved to 177,500 since 1997, and why it has lost five million votes.

The slogan of the national demonstration on March 26 was “March for the Alternative”. But the line of the TUC and Labour Party is not for an alternative to the cuts, but an alternative form of imposing cuts. This is why it was used as a platform for the leader of the Labour Party, Ed Miliband, to insist, “There is a need for difficult choices, and some cuts.”

You are entitled to disagree with our “plan of action”, but not to pretend that the SEP does not have one. The statement explained the need to generalise the struggle against the cuts into a broader offensive to bring down the coalition government and fight for a workers’ government. The working class is confronted with a struggle for power.

A genuine opposition to the cuts can only be developed by rejecting the premise that there is no money to fund decent-paying jobs, affordable social housing and education and health for all. But the working class must take control of the banks, utilities and industries and place them under democratic control.

Your conception of a plan of action consists of a series of tactics aimed at pressuring and gaining the ear of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. You believe this is where the real power lies in society.

We believe it lies with the working class, mobilised behind its own revolutionary party, the Socialist Equality Party.

Tony Robson



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