

British business secretary appeals for ongoing alliance between government, trade unions

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Business Secretary Vince Cable's appearance at the GMB trade union conference on Monday was a nauseating spectacle.

"We are undoubtedly entering a difficult period", Cable told delegates in reference to the government's austerity programme and continuing economic stagnation.

"Cool heads will be required all round", he advised.

"Despite occasional blips, I know that strike levels remain historically low, especially in the private sector", he said. "On that basis, and assuming this pattern continues, the case for changing strike law is not compelling.

"However, should the position change, and should strikes impose serious damage to our economic and social fabric, the pressure on us to act would ratchet up. That is something which both you, and certainly I, would wish to avoid".

The media reported that Cable's "veiled threats" to tighten anti-union legislation were greeted with "fury" by union bosses.

Cable was "interrupted by shouts, boos and catcalls" at various points, while "some held up a banner which read, 'Vince Cable not welcome—Stop Attacking Workers' Rights'".

GMB General Secretary Paul Kenny said Cable's statement was an "insult to working people".

The real insult is the fact that Cable was ever invited in the first place; one that was not covered over by the pathetic token display of "opposition" by a handful of delegates.

It is Cable's Liberal Democrats, in coalition with the Conservative Party, who are doing "serious damage" to the UK's "economic and social fabric"—pushing through the most severe cuts in public spending since the 1930s, attacks on welfare and a tripling of student

tuition fees.

There is no popular backing for these measures—least of all for the Liberal Democrats, who suffered their worst ever results in local authority elections in May.

While working people suffer falling wages, rising unemployment and growing economic insecurity, the wealth of the super-rich is once again soaring to its pre-2008 levels, largely as a result of the bailout of the banks.

As business secretary, Cable has directly contributed to this situation, helping protect the financial institutions from any accounting for their criminal speculative activities.

That he was chosen by the GMB to make the keynote speech to its conference says all one needs to know about the role of the trade unions in facilitating the coalition government's agenda.

When Cable referred to "historically low" strike levels, he wasn't exaggerating. The *Guardian* featured a graph of strike activity over the last decades produced by data company Timetric. If this were a patient on life support, it would be comatose.

For all the feigned outrage over Cable's remarks, the disconnect between the reality of life for working people and the activity, or lack thereof, of the trade unions is becoming ever more apparent.

Only recently it emerged that the GMB had been involved in a report that endorsed the privatisation of the UK's employment and benefit system. Entitled, "The road to work and opportunity in the 21st Century", it was commissioned by Kennedy Scott, which is looking to take over welfare-to-work measures, and sponsored by the accountancy firm PFK.

Emblazoned with the logos of Kennedy Scott, PFK and the GMB, which "identified" several of the individuals interviewed, the report specifically endorses

the US workfare firm, America Works.

When the GMB's involvement was made public, Kenny denied that the union had endorsed the report, which he claimed never to have read. But it is reported that an official spokesperson for the GMB was present at the report's launch at a reception in the House of Lords. The report concludes with a glowing profile of the GMB, apparently written by the union.

More broadly, thousands of workers are being laid off across the public sector, while only in March the contracts of some 100,000 employees were arbitrarily ripped up and replaced with worse conditions. Privatisation is proceeding apace throughout the National Health Service, in education and other vital services.

In all this time, no union has made any serious effort to oppose these attacks. Throughout the government's 12 months in office, the Trades Union Congress has organised just one national demonstration.

The TUC and its affiliated unions are complicit in enabling the government's measures to be pushed through. The unions are currently in talks over public sector pension "reform", under which the existing provision of some 5.5 million employees is to be ripped up so they are made to work longer and pay higher contributions for a lower pension on retirement.

In face of this unprecedented assault, only a handful of unions are threatening a limited protest strike on June 30, mainly those led by members of the pseudo-left groups to reinforce their claim that the TUC can be made to lead a fight-back.

Behind the scenes, the union tops are preparing to give the government everything and are working out how best to do so without provoking a reaction from their members.

Much of Cable's speech was intended to consolidate this relationship between the coalition and the trade unions against the working class.

The business secretary's reference to how "the usual suspects will call for general strikes and widespread disruption" was intended to set up a straw-man of "extremist militants" that both government and the union must unite against. Similarly, talk of tightening anti-union legislation is designed as a get-out clause for the union bosses to justify their opposition to any action beyond token gestures.

"I want a mature, productive relationship with trade

unions", Cable said, outlining his regular talks with TUC leader Brendan Barber and others.

"The government is genuinely committed to further engagement with trade unions. We genuinely want your input", he said. "[W]e have much in common. We share many policy aims. We face the same economic challenges. Let's address them together".

Chancellor George Osborne backed Cable's stance. "Of course we want a constructive relationship with the public sector unions", he said. "We have got important negotiations under way, for instance on pensions.

"What Vince is saying is if we go into a cycle of destructive strikes we would have to think again—but let's hope we don't get there".

Cable addressed the GMB the same day that the International Monetary Fund made its annual report on the UK economy, in which it rejected criticisms from sections of the political elite that the imposition of such large spending cuts in one go is compounding the UK's economic problems.

While acknowledging that the sluggish economic growth and rising inflation of the last months had been "unexpected", the IMF said, "This raises the question whether it is time to adjust macroeconomic policies. The answer is no...".

The IMF report not only endorsed the coalition's austerity measures, arguing that the stability of the UK's financial system was a "global public good", it insisted that, should they prove inadequate, the solution would be to slash taxes, not increase spending.



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