

How the SWP in Britain cover for the betrayals of the trade union bureaucracy

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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If there were any truth in the claim by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) that its annual rally, Marxism 2011, is about “austerity, resistance and revolution”, then it could never be addressed by the trade union leaders advertised.

Just what do invited speakers such as Unite’s Len McCluskey and Mark Serwotka of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) have to say about “resistance”, never mind “revolution”?

Coinciding with protests against the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition’s attack on public sector pensions, Marxism 2011’s sole purpose is to provide a pseudo-left smokescreen at a time when McCluskey and Serwotka are strangling opposition to the government’s austerity measures. This pattern is to be repeated with appearances by Matt Wrack (Fire Brigades Union), Kevin Courtney of the National Union of Teachers, and Billy Hayes of the Communication Workers Union.

McCluskey, should he in fact appear, will arrive fresh from signing what the SWP has acknowledged to be a “scabs charter” at British Airways—agreeing to BA’s right to train and use a special pool of replacement cabin crew in the event of any future strike and pledging that it will not defend its own members should they take legal action against BA, such as an employment tribunal.

The response of Unite’s executive to the SWP’s statement of fact was to threaten it with expulsion from the self-designated “United Left” that dominates the union. In response, the SWP has dropped any statements that could remotely be interpreted as critical

of the Unite executive, despite its having organised no action for the June 30 protest strikes the SWP has hailed as the beginning of a fight-back by the unions.

The PCS is, at this point, committed to the most limited of token protest strikes against aspects of the government assault on public sector pensions. But Serwotka made clear to the *New Statesman* magazine that in 2005, his union had already accepted the ending of final salary pensions for new entrants, and would do the same now for all civil servants if the government made a slightly improved offer. He reassured his interviewer, “This is not about bringing employers to their knees but about forcing the government to back down on cuts”.

Unison is no different. The largest public sector union was conspicuously absent from the June 30 protests. Yet the SWP described the bluster of its leader Dave Prentis, threatening a wave of industrial action that will be “the biggest since the 1926 General Strike,” as a “call to arms,” which has “scared the government into partially backtracking”.

The truth is that the government is threatening new anti-strike legislation and urging teachers and others to scab. The only “backtracking” comes from Unison, with Prentis claiming that “real negotiations” are now underway. The proposed “rolling programme of strikes in individual regions, at particular employers and by specific groups of essential workers” is a way of dividing and demobilising workers and nothing more.

A petition circulated by the SWP and Socialist Party among Sheffield Unison members, calling for a special Annual General Meeting to find out why the union had not honoured a mandate to hold a strike ballot, was met

with bitter denunciations from the union about this “destructive activity”. This will likely not be mentioned at Marxism 2011, as the SWP continues to shield Prentis and other union bureaucrats from the deserved anger of their own members.

Similarly, there will be no discussion of the Unison executive ruling out of order resolutions at its recent conference that called on local authorities to defy the government cuts. Executive member Glen Williams said the union “cannot support local councillors who support and attempt to set illegal budgets”. The union stands full-square with the Labour Party and will defend it to the hilt as it implements massive job losses and spending cuts in the local authorities it controls.

Behind all the rhetoric about “general strikes” and “united action,” 13 months into the coalition government most of the public sector unions, and all those covering the private sector, are not organising a single significant protest or strike.

The SWP is not simply covering up for the betrayals of others; it is actively carrying them out. The SWP has a significant presence on the executives of many unions and dominates the University and College Union (UCU). Having already agreed to the changes demanded by the government to the Universities Superannuation Scheme, the UCU is only mobilising a tiny section of its membership June 30; only those covered by the Teachers’ Pension Scheme in universities founded after 1992 are taking part in protests on what is a non-teaching day.

The invitation extended to Billy Hayes, the general secretary of the CWU is especially significant, given that he is jointly responsible for the betrayal of the postal workers’ dispute against the previous Labour government, alongside the SWP’s former leading union bureaucrat, Jane Loftus, who was then CWU president.

The trade unions and the Labour Party, including supposed lefts such as Tony Benn and John McDonnell, offer no solution to working people faced with the most severe economic crisis since the 1930s. There are no differences of substance between the

labour bureaucracy and the coalition government—all are pledged to uphold the interests of the banks and financial oligarchy.

That is the central lesson from Greece, Spain and Ireland, where social democracy is playing the leading role in imposing savage austerity measures against the broad mass of the population. In every country, the ruling elite are wholly dependent on the trade union bureaucracy to stifle the class struggle.

This is what makes the SWP’s claims to stand in the tradition of “Marxism” and “socialism” so thoroughly dishonest.

The burning issue for the working class in Britain, Europe and internationally is the building of its own political party to lead the struggle for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, the abolition of private property and the nation state and the socialist reorganization of economic life.

For all the talk of “revolution,” the central axis of Marxism 2011 is to justify why such a party cannot and must not be built “at this point in time”. Behind the appeals for “united fronts of a special type,” the SWP is justifying its own incorporation within the apparatus of the trade union bureaucracy, and the alliance it hopes to cement with sections of the Labour Party.



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