

Britain's Trades Union Congress threatens November strikes over pensions

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Even as political theatre, this year's Trades Union Congress (TUC) threats of strike action against the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government was badly executed.

The language was bellicose, though limited entirely to a campaign opposing attacks on public sector pensions. A November 30 day of action was "set", involving 3 million workers against plans to increase employee contributions by £1 billion next year after wiping away 15 percent of their value last year by indexing them to the Consumer Price Index. Additional "savings" of more than £5 billion are to be made by 2014.

Unite Assistant General Secretary Tony Burke declared, "There is no room for bystanders in the coming battle," while Unison General Secretary Dave Prentis warned of action involving "strikes in our schools, our civil service, our fire brigade, our local government service, our health service."

But Prentis himself gave the lie to such claims when he added, "We have still time to negotiate, two to three months to sort things out. We want to sort things out."

If the assembled bureaucrats have their way, their strike threats will remain empty. And if strikes do go ahead, the real intention of the TUC leaders is to stage the most minimal token stoppages possible as a means of dissipating the anger of their members. That is why union officials have cited the "innovative tactics" employed by Unison and Unite in the rolling strikes by different sections of workers against Tory-run Southampton city council. It is solely a means of preventing any general mobilisation against the government by organisations that—other than a one-day protest in March and a more limited protest against pension cuts by the smaller public sector unions on June 30—have organised no national action against the

government since it came to office in May 2010.

One need only recall how at last year's TUC conference the same meaningless and wholly insincere threats were made. "Millions of workers are now on a collision course with the Government which could lead to a wave of strikes in the coming months as the scale of the austerity measures unfolds," wrote the *Telegraph* on September 13, 2010. "Leaders of the country's biggest unions lined up at the TUC conference in Manchester to lambast the Coalition for its spending cuts...."

The launching of a political and industrial struggle by the TUC is a day that never dawns. Rhetoric aside, the trade unions fully intend to carry on colluding with the government nationally, the employers and Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour-controlled authorities in imposing whatever cuts are demanded of them.

The trade unions have presided over three decades of declining strike action, with each year bringing a new historic low—a path from which they have not shifted despite £100 billion in spending cuts and thousands of job losses, including more than 110,000 in the public sector in the past three months. That is why the TUC could again play host to a new Labour Party leader, this time Ed Miliband. He used the occasion to berate those unions that organised a one-day strike on June 30 "while negotiations were going on" and to tell his hosts that "strikes are always the consequence of failure... on all sides" that "we cannot afford as a nation. Instead, your real role is as partners in the new economy."

"There are cuts that the Tories will impose that we will not be able to reverse when we return to government," he declared. "And getting the deficit down means rooting out waste too."

For this deliberately provocative speech, Miliband

was applauded by most delegates and jeered by barely a handful. Paul Kenny, of the GMB, gave him credit “for his courage.... What comes across is that he is not ashamed of the trade union links to the Labour Party.”

Even the appearance of the TUC conference this year more closely matched the moribund character of Britain’s trade unions. Once the occasion for thousands to assemble, representing a movement that in 1979 had 13 million members, this week 300 delegates gathered officially representing less than six-and-a-half million members—and in truth much less than that.

In 2009, 23.5 percent of the total UK workforce belonged to a trade union. It is now less than 20 percent, one in five. Of these, the bulk are in the public sector, with private sector membership somewhat less than 12 percent. Youth membership of the trade unions is vanishingly small.

These percentages do not take into account membership decline brought about through rising unemployment and disillusionment with the rotten record of the trade unions. To cite one example, Unite was launched in 2007 claiming to have over 2 million members. It now claims just 1.5 million, but, as noted by the Socialist Workers Party in a rare moment of truth regarding the trade unions, has just produced a recruitment strategy document for its full-time officers which “acknowledges that its membership now stands at 1,182,000 members, a fall of nearly 1 million.”

Only those seeking to reinforce the suffocating grip of the union bureaucracy over the working class could take the TUC’s pronouncements as good coin. And that task falls to the myriad ex-left groupings that orbit around the trade union apparatus and secure comfortable berths within it.

“This week’s trades union congress (TUC) conference in London was angry,” the Socialist Workers Party wrote. “Union officials lined up to attack the government.... [S]peech after speech showed that the argument for resisting the Tories has won.”

The Socialist Party claimed that the TUC had “heeded” the call for action by a lobby of the National Shop Stewards Network, in which it is involved alongside the Communist Party. Now “the floodgates would open.”

Opening the floodgates is exactly what the TUC wants to prevent. The trade unions neither represent the working class as a whole, nor even their own dwindling

membership—only the bureaucracy that controls them. This wealthy layer has a vested interest in defending the major corporations, the government and the profit system from any threat from below. Their fat six-figure salaries, pension packages, cars, grace and favour flats and houses depend more on their close relations with the employers than on a largely disaffected membership and on their substantial investments in shares and property.

The class struggle cannot be waged under such a leadership, or through the organisations that they head. Bitter experiences over the past three decades, every defeated or aborted strike, prove the need for working people to break with the trade unions and form their own independent organisations—rank-and-file committees in the workplaces and broader popular organisations in working class communities. Above all, what is required is the adoption of a socialist programme and the building of a socialist party to take up the political struggle against the parties of big business, both the official coalition parties and their de-facto partner, Labour.



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