

British Conservatives pledge continued austerity

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11 October 2011

The Conservative Party met at its annual conference in Manchester last week with the threatened implosion of the Eurozone and the wild gyrations of the world stocks markets as its backdrop. New data revealed that the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition's strategy of relentless austerity against the population has failed to stem a worsening economic crisis. Britain's economy barely grew in the second quarter due largely to a collapse in consumer spending, prompting fears of recession.

The Tories' response was predictable. Prime Minister David Cameron declared there would be no retreat from savage cuts. The sovereign debt crisis was caused by "too much borrowing, by individuals, businesses, banks, and most of all, governments," he said. "It means governments--all over the world--cutting spending and living within their means."

Three years on from the global financial meltdown, with the banks again reporting massive profits and raking in massive bonuses, Cameron, as a representative of the financial elite, concealed a critical fact: that it was the government bailout of these very same banks that has caused the economic ruin of millions of people.

Virtually everything Cameron uttered in his speech was a lie, but the biggest falsehood was his claim that the banks are now facing the heaviest burden in paying off the debt. "You can't cut a deficit the size of ours without everyone making a sacrifice. But those with the most money are bearing the biggest burden," said the political representative of the super-rich.

The *Financial Times* responded, "The prime minister's task was to avoid underplaying the scale of Britain's economic challenges while rejecting any hint of pessimism. He broadly managed this, while leaving unsaid the fact that Britain remains at the mercy of events in the Eurozone."

Max Hastings in the Pro-Tory *Daily Mail* wrote, "it seems foolish to pretend that his speech will dispel public unease that amid global financial turmoil his government lacks a coherent plan."

The Tories and their coalition partners are hated by much

of the population. It is a right-wing government comprised of super-privileged ideologues. Of Cameron's first cabinet of 29 politicians, both Tory and Liberal, 23 had assets and investments estimated to be worth more than £1 million.

Cameron, George Osborne and others such as London Mayor Boris Johnson are products of ultra-right student groups from Oxford University's Bullingdon Club and the Federation of Conservative Students. While at university, these layers reveled in the reactionary social and economic nostrums of Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek. Worshiping at the altar of Margaret Thatcher, they just as happily genuflected before her own idol, the Chilean fascist General Augusto Pinochet.

Today, these children of Thatcher are convinced their time has come and, thanks to the preparatory work of the previous Labour government, they can now finish the social counter-revolution her government began. These layers will stop at nothing, as they seek to roll back the social position of the working class to an era before the establishment of the welfare state in 1945.

The mood of the assembled Tories was epitomised by a conference delegate who emerged from a reception at Manchester Town Hall and assumed a pose as a gunman, as he pretended to shoot protesters assembled in the adjacent Albert Square. He was photographed in the act and the image has been published by an independent magazine, the *Salford Star*. [<http://www.salfordstar.com/images/m/Conservative%20Party%20Conference%20gunman.JPG>]

How is such a reviled government able to remain in office and go so far in imposing its attacks?

The answer to this question lies in the most significant event at the Conservative conference, which was not anything that took place on its floor or any public pronouncement. Trades Union Congress leader Brendan Barber came to Manchester to hold secret talks on how to suppress the development of any mass opposition.

The TUC and its affiliated unions have made great play of the fact that a number of unions are involved in ballots for industrial action over the governments' attacks on public

sector pensions, and have set November 30 as a “day of action.” This is, as expected, loudly hailed by the ex-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party as a dramatic turn by the unions to class struggle.

“But lurking in the background is the one thing that can ruin their party—the strikes coming on 30 November,” wrote the SWP in its superficial 115-word comment on the conference. “It’s little wonder the Tories want to attack the unions... The strike on 30 November, which could involve four times that number of public sector workers, with enormous public support in opposition to the cuts, has the potential to help unseat this government,” echoed the SP.

Neither group mentioned that the action, even were it to go ahead, would only be the second protest organised by the unions since the government took office a year and a half ago. On June 30 this year, when a protest was called by a handful of unions, the main public sector unions, Unison, GMB and Unite did not take part. More fundamentally, for three decades the TUC has not mounted a single struggle of any note in defence of working people and presides today over record low levels of strike activity.

Such token protests as that scheduled for November 30 are the stock in trade of the trade union bureaucracy throughout Europe, used only to dissipate mounting social tensions.

But Barber’s visit to the Tory conference makes clear where the TUC really stands.

The *Independent*, which revealed the talks, noted that Barber met with Chancellor George Osborne “in an attempt to avert next month’s planned one-day strike, the biggest for a generation.”

Barber also had talks with leading coalition politicians, including “Liberal Democrat Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander, and the Tory Cabinet Office ministers Francis Maude and Oliver Letwin, for informal talks in the margins of the Conservative Party Conference,” reported the newspaper.

The *Independent* said that Barber spoke “informally to Mr Osborne and Mr Maude” and said the trade unions felt aggrieved, “by the way changes to pensions were announced without any prior consultation.”

Making clear that the union bureaucracy is working might and main to derail any struggle by public sector workers, it continued, “Mr Barber stressed that unions were committed to reaching an agreement, but urged ministers to table new proposals. *One possible compromise involves how the pension changes are phased in,*” [emphasis added].

Barber epitomises the social type represented by the trade union bureaucracy, just as much as the Eton-educated toff Cameron does the Tory Party.

Schooled by the Christian Brothers, Barber went on to become President of the Student Union at university before

entering the TUC almost immediately after finishing his degree, and rising through the administration over a 35-year period.

Today he is a tried-and-tested representative of the ruling elite, with a six-figure salary, who sits on the Bank of England’s Court of Directors. At the TUC’s annual Congress in 2010, Bank of England governor Mervyn King said of Barber’s role following the world financial crash in 2008, “Brendan has helped us through some extremely turbulent times. I am grateful to him.”

The right wing *Spectator* magazine noted this week that it held a reception at Tory conference it described as “the hottest ticket in conference ... mainly because the drinks come in a flute courtesy of Pol Roger.” It noted how “midway someone pointed out an unusual gatecrasher: Brendan Barber, head of the TUC, who was standing near the door savouring his Pol Roger as much as the next man,” before commenting acidly, “The struggle, as they say, takes many forms.”

It is the army of trade union apparatchiks headed by Barber that are working to shield the government from mass opposition.

The TUC have held regular talks with the government ever since it took office. Last December following a meeting with TUC executive members at Downing Street, a government spokesman commented on the “good-natured” talks and emphasised that Cameron was “keen to work with organised labour.”

In the fight against the coalition, everything depends on breaking the stranglehold of the trade unions and the building of new, popular organisations, committed to waging mass resistance. Central to this is the construction of a new political party of the working class, the Socialist Equality Party.



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