

UK: The political fraud of the “anti-bedroom tax” campaign

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April 1 saw the implementation by the British government of measures that, taken together, constitute the most serious assault on the social welfare on which millions of working people depend since the early years of the 1930s’ Depression.

As well as the Health and Social Care Act, which sets out to break up the National Health Service and open it up to private capital, measures include a reduction in Council Tax benefit for the 3.7 million lowest income families, a cap on total benefit payments to individual families and the abolition of crisis loans and community care grants. The Disability Living Allowance is being abolished, to be replaced by a Personal Independence Payment, for which 500,000 fewer people will be eligible.

To prevent a wave of legal challenges, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition is also abolishing Legal Aid for welfare advice.

Amongst the reactionary measures is a so-called “bedroom tax”. The term is a misnomer for a benefit cut that penalises housing support claimants living in social housing and who are deemed to have more rooms than their numbers require. Claimants with one extra room face losing 14 percent of their rent support, those with two extra rooms will lose 25 percent.

This vindictive measure will lead inevitably to evictions, homelessness and a sharp rise in poverty amongst the most vulnerable. As many as 660,000 people are estimated to be affected. In the city of Liverpool and its immediate surroundings alone, some 30,000 people stand to lose up to £1,000 a year. Of these, 7,000 are disabled housing association tenants.

The “tax” is also an assault on social housing provided by local authorities and housing associations. It will tend to drive tenants into privately rented accommodation, where the bedroom restrictions do not

apply, but where rental costs are generally higher. The *Financial Times* reported that the Prudential, the British-based financial services transnational giant, is moving into the private rental market with an initial purchase of 500 homes.

At the same time, rent support payments in future will be handed directly to tenants, instead of as currently, to the housing authorities. This will further undermine the financial basis of social housing as tenants will be unable to pay rents and will fall into arrears.

Demonstrations and protests took place in town centres across Britain March 30, two days before the measures’ introduction. In the main, however the demonstrations focused solely on the “bedroom tax”. Among the largest were those held in London, Edinburgh and Glasgow. At the latter around 5,000 people marched to George Square in the city centre.

The small size and belated and narrow character of the protests point to the complicity of the trade unions in what is a historic assault on the social position of the British working class. Not only have the unions refused to warn of the character of the measures being prepared, let alone mobilise against them, they are directly implicated in their implementation.

Without the active participation of unions such as Unison, the PCS, Unite and the GMB, which cover the areas of the public sector that will administer the cuts, the government’s measures could not survive a single day. Yet at no time have the leadership of these organisations gone so far as to threaten that they will disrupt, let alone block, the cuts.

Instead, the unions, in the form of their apologists in the ex-left parties, have sought to draw attention away from the central political issues by singling out the “bedroom tax” as the principal target of opposition.

The ex-lefts aim to restrict opposition to the

destruction of social welfare to local anti-bedroom tax campaigns, oriented primarily to lobbying housing authorities to refuse to evict tenants.

As well as exonerating the unions, this tactic also enables the pseudo-left organisations to provide a platform for the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party (SNP) to posture as opponents of austerity.

In Scotland, the anti-tax protests are being used to build support for a “Yes” vote in the referendum on Scottish independence, the date for which has now been set as September 18, 2014.

This perspective was on display at the demonstration in Glasgow. Speakers presented the tax as solely the work of English Tory toffs who, in the words of Scottish nationalist anti-bedroom tax campaigner Alan Wylie, speak for “a government that has no mandate in Scotland”.

Dave Sherry of the Socialist Workers Party likened the “bedroom tax” to the Poll Tax, introduced by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in 1989-90. Sherry claimed that “massive demonstrations, massive non-payment campaigns smashed Thatcher’s Poll Tax and drove her from office. We can do the same with the bedroom tax”.

Ex-leader of the Scottish Socialist Party, Tommy Sheridan, spoke at a meeting of his Solidarity party along the same lines, calling on the SNP to change the Housing Act (Scotland) 2001 and to re-classify rent arrears as ordinary debt, thereby removing the threat of eviction. A petition is being presented to the Scottish parliament on April 16 to this effect.

Sheridan made no reference in his 20-minute speech to a single measure being imposed outside Scotland. He ranted “Our challenge to [Scottish First Minister] Alex Salmond and the SNP government is: step up to the plate. Put yourself at the head of this campaign”.

In reality, the social counterrevolution set in motion April 1 by Prime Minister David Cameron’s government poses workers with the need to reject Scottish separatism and break with Labour and the trade unions. As already witnessed in Greece, Cyprus, Ireland and across Europe, the financial oligarchy has embarked on an unprecedented campaign to do away with social welfare measures they have always bitterly resented.

Opposing this demands the unified mobilisation of the working class in Britain. Action committees must

be set up in every area, in every office and factory, school and hospital, to lead the fight for a workers’ government based on socialist policies.



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