

UK Socialist Party mounts its defence of the union bureaucracy

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For anyone who has lain awake at night wondering just how far the Socialist Party (SP) will go in abasing itself before the trade union bureaucracy, they now have an answer.

Earlier this year, the SP announced it was holding its Socialism 2013 conference on the first weekend in November, blissfully unaware that it would take place in the midst of a two-week orgy of betrayal by the unions. At the time, the SP was peddling the illusion that “coordinated” action by the unions was in the cards and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was on the verge of “investigating the possibility of a general strike.”

Instead, Socialism 2013 opened in the aftermath of one union after another having called off planned strikes or postponing them indefinitely. The few that went ahead were held on different days and had a token character—such as a two-hour stoppage by the Fire Brigades Union, with no plans for further action.

The conference became a desperate exercise in damage limitation, covering the exposed rear of the trade union bureaucracy, particularly in the Unite trade union after the rout at Grangemouth oil refinery a few days before.

Just 24 hours after INEOS had threatened to close the refinery, Unite’s general secretary, Len McCluskey, gave the company all it wanted and more, signing a “survival plan” involving a three-year pay freeze, a no-strike deal, cuts to bonuses and the gutting of the final salary pension scheme. Hailing this sell-out as the “Battle of Grangemouth,” SP leader Peter Taaffe insisted that, “Lennie McCluskey” and his union had not suffered a “decisive defeat” but a “setback” and “had lived to fight another day.”

This was the message of the day, taken up by the three union general secretaries who had pride of place

on the platform of the opening rally.

First to pontificate was Bob Crow, leader of the rail union RMT, who regaled his audience with “the shocking events of that horrible firm up there in Scotland in Grangemouth” and the sacking of Unite convenor Stephen Deans.

Crow declared, “I salute Steve Dennis [sic] for what he did up there and take my hat off to Unite for standing firm. If they had never done that deal whatever the wrongs of it in two or three years’ time they’ve got the opportunity to come back and get a winning goal at a replay or reverse match.”

“Working people of this country or any other don’t have defeats. We have setbacks from time to time,” he asserted. “But our ultimate goal is that we will always win.”

For this apologia for betrayal Crow received warm applause.

Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), gave a speech in which he insisted that it would be “churlish” to criticise Labour leader Ed Miliband’s promise to build 1 million homes and freeze energy prices. “Given everything we’ve heard in the last 20 years it is good we are finally hearing some things working class people will welcome,” Serwotka said, adding, “We should go further.”

Serwotka declared, “Labour will have to make the decision—either move left or be swept aside by a mass movement.” But he stressed, “That is for the future. Now is the struggle against austerity.”

Serwotka’s idea of a struggle was outlined in his closing remarks. He had written to the unions “currently in dispute” in higher education, schools, the fire service and probation service “to call an urgent meeting, to finally sit down and say to ourselves...it is

entirely possible that...action is coordinated. Not one day of strike action but three or four months of coordinated action designed to bring the government to its knees.”

To talk of months when not one day of coordinated action has taken place after years of austerity was laughable. But his audience responded once more with rapturous applause.

Like Crow, Serwotka had nothing to say about what has happened to his members or the PCS’s role. It would be an embarrassment for him and the SP, which has several members on the PCS executive and along with a number of other pseudo-lefts collectively enjoy a sizeable majority. In May 2012, the PCS abandoned a planned strike to defend public sector pensions after a massive majority of 90 percent. When other unions abandoned their commitment, the executive used it as an excuse to call off the planned national strike.

Communications Workers Union general secretary Billy Hayes was the last bureaucrat to speak. He had no option but to address the privatisation of Royal Mail a few days before the SP’s weekend conference. He outlined how opinion polls showed 70 percent of the public opposed to the privatisation of Royal Mail and 96 percent of postal workers before saying, “We have halted strike action on Monday,” putting the blame for defeat on an unexplained “balance of forces.”

“We wanted you to get the authentic voice of the working class in Britain by having the tremendous contributions made by the general secretaries on this platform,” declared Taaffe.

He pointed to the top table, but by this time Crow, Serwotka and Hayes had packed their bags and left. This moment encapsulated what the bureaucracy think of the SP—a mechanism to cover their past betrayals and provide the foot-soldiers for future ones.

Taaffe carried on regardless, calling for his audience to take a “sober attitude” to workers’ struggles—by which he meant to blame the working class for the betrayal of its leaders. “The main weakness at Grangemouth, we have to be honest, was the Unite membership and the working class,” he claimed. “By that we mean the consciousness of the working class was insufficiently developed by events before and the leadership who have a responsibility in that situation.”

“Do you think,” Taaffe asked, “that this pipsqueak [INEOS boss] Ratcliffe would have been prepared to

implement his conspiracy against the unions and workforce if the TUC had carried out the decisions of last year’s TUC Congress and organised a 24-hour general strike on a national scale?”

Taaffe told his audience they had to learn the lessons, explaining how “The far-sighted representatives of the capitalist system understand they are fighting a war, but the problem apart from the three great contributions from the general secretaries today, the leadership of our movement—and that includes Miliband unfortunately—at this stage do not believe they are in a war.”

He insisted that Unite has “lived to fight another day.... We have had defeats in the past but the working class has made it up through its trade union organisation.”

He had held a “friendly and frank” meeting with “Lennie” recently, who said he had had “nothing from Miliband.” When asked to disaffiliate from the Labour Party, McCluskey had said, “Give Miliband a chance.”

Taaffe nevertheless reassured the audience that the “platform”—i.e., the union leaders—“is moving towards us.”

The SP functions as nothing less than a special detachment of the union bureaucracy, tasked with painting in left and socialist colours policies, programmes and individuals that are virulently hostile to even the most basic interests of working class. The party has the moral integrity of a pimp, prostituting its members and offering its paper as a propaganda sheet for the bureaucracy.



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