

UK unions collude in the passing of anti-strike legislation

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9 May 2016

The passage into law of the Conservative government's Trade Union Act was made possible by the rotten and degraded character of Britain's trade unions.

The act, passed May 4, contains fundamental attacks on the right to strike and is an assault on civil liberties. Yet since it was first proposed last year, it has met with only token opposition. The only concern of the trade union leaders has been to protect their own income, raised from dues-paying members. The same holds true for their allies in the Labour Party, who receive millions of pounds every year from the unions via the political levy.

The Act makes strikes illegal if fewer than 50 percent of union members vote in a postal ballot and fewer than 40 percent of all workers in "important public services" vote for action, regardless of turnout. Unions must give employers 14 days' notice of strike action and renew any strike mandate with a new ballot within four months of the original ballot. It removes regulations that currently prohibit the use of agency workers to be used as strikebreakers.

What is deemed "unlawful" picketing is made a criminal, as opposed to a civil offence. Unions must liaise with the police during a strike and send them details of pickets and demonstrations. Local councils are empowered to impose community protection orders against trade unions to prevent "intimidation." It also requires "certification officers" to order unions to hand over information during investigations, including the names and addresses of union members.

The Act includes new powers to fine trade unions over the conduct of internal elections, ballots, the spending of political funds and violations of reporting rules, including an annual audit on strikes, pickets and protests.

Despite these attacks, the bill passed almost in its entirety and with minimal media coverage.

The Trades Unions Congress (TUC) mounted the type of campaign in which it specialises, with no strikes or even a rally organised. Instead a bogus "week of activities" (February 8-14) was held in which the main event was a "big workplace meeting" that consisted of TUC leader Frances O'Grady being interviewed for 15 minutes about the Bill, which was streamed to a few workplace meetings held in various cities. The TUC held the interview at lunchtime to cause the least possible inconvenience to employers.

The only changes made to the Bill came after it was defeated in the House of Lords on March 16. The upper chamber agreed with cross-party committee recommendations that any change to funding arrangements should be restricted to new members only, with the four million trade unionists already paying the political levy exempted.

The Trade Union Bill's first incarnation proposed the abolition of the "check-off" system in the heavily unionised public sector, with union subscriptions deducted automatically from wages. It also stipulated that union members would have to agree in writing every five years to pay into the political fund.

Labour estimated this would result in a loss of income of at least £35 million across a five-year parliament. An internal document read, "The party could not absorb a loss of £5-6 m and maintain its current structure. With an annual salary cost in excess of over 50% of total costs, it is clear that current staffing levels could not be sustained."

With the June referendum on the UK's European Union membership looming, the Conservative government-backed Remain campaign is heavily reliant on the support of Labour and the unions.

The call for a Remain vote is based on support for the reactionary deal negotiated by Prime Minister David Cameron with the other 27 EU heads of state, which includes a clampdown on the welfare rights of European migrants and an exemption from financial regulations for the City of London.

To maintain their rotten alliance, the unions and the Tories came to agreement on a few amendments—ensuring the anti-democratic legislation was passed.

In the final bill, the union dues check-off will continue, where the costs are met by the trade unions and with the only requirement that being that union members have the option of paying subscriptions by other means.

Under the original proposals, the bill gave the unions just three months to obtain the signature of members agreeing to the payment of the levy. Now the unions will be given 12 months to transition to the new system.

The Act also does away with imposing a cap on union officials' "facility time"—funding for time off to carry out union duties. The government also agreed to the unions' demand for a review on electronic voting in strike ballots.

The law passed with the TUC issuing just a four-paragraph statement, in which O'Grady acknowledged the Bill attacked "the right to strike—a fundamental British liberty" but pledged to do nothing in response. The main problem with the law, said O'Grady, was that it "poses a serious threat to good industrial relations" the TUC has with employers.

In exchange for getting their amendments to the Bill, according to *Channel 4 News*, the trade unions "could be preparing to donate up to £1.7m to Labour In For Britain"—the official group in support of the Remain campaign.

The government announced the concessions just prior to a joint article published in the *Guardian* by Prime Minister David Cameron and former TUC leader Brendan Barber, in which they wrote that it is "right that the rules of conventional politics be temporarily set aside" because of the "prospects for working people all across Britain at stake on 23 June."

The TUC's endorsement allowed Cameron, whose government is responsible for an unrelenting assault on jobs, wages and conditions, to pose as a friend of the workers. "If we choose to stay in the EU", said the

article, "we can protect working people and the poorest families. We can choose stability and economic security—a bright future with more jobs, higher pay and lower prices."

Given the decades-long collaboration of the TUC with successive Tory and Labour governments in attacking the working class, the Trades Union Bill would have still passed without opposition even if there had been no EU referendum. The only difference would have been on the Tory side, which would have not felt compelled to make even minor concessions to the union bureaucracy.

Barber's last act as leader was to receive praise at a TUC Congress in 2010 from then-Bank of England governor Mervyn King. 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 unions and the ruling elite address each with increased openness not as adversaries but as colleagues.

Cameron and Barber speak of the European Union as "our home market of 500 million consumers." They end with the plea: "For the sake of every worker in Britain, we urge you: vote to remain." The one section of society which neither the unions nor Labour speak for is the working class. Their role in ensuring the passage of the Trade Union Bill again demonstrates that, for the sake of every worker, what is required is the building of new rank-and-file organisations of class struggle and a new party dedicated to the struggle for socialism.



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