UK pseudo-left push corporatist agenda to derail essential worker strikes

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A People's Assembly online rally in support of “key workers and striking workers” was ostensibly to build solidarity for industrial actions against the ripping up of employment rights, pay and conditions. But behind the talk of “standing together” and “fighting with everything we've got”, not a single concrete proposal was advanced to unite these struggles.

Having been hailed as “essential workers” over the last year of the pandemic and forced to work in unsafe conditions, those employed by British Gas, the National Health Service (NHS) and in the transport sector are among many being rewarded with the imposition of “fire and rehire” contacts and de facto wage cuts. They are in the frontline of an offensive by the ruling elite to use the pandemic to fundamentally restructure class relations. That is why, simultaneous with these attacks, the government is bringing forward a Police Bill that will effectively illegalise the right to protest and strike.

These developments confirm the WSWS appraisal of the COVID-19 pandemic as a “trigger event” that has intensified and accelerated the profound contradictions of the global capitalist system. It is laying bare the irreconcilable antagonism between the capitalist class, which starts from the defence of private property relations and the geostrategic interests of the nation state, and the working class, which strives objectively for the ending of the profit system and the reorganisation of economic life based on human need, as part of a global struggle to abolish the nation-state system. These opposing class interests find political expression in the struggle between the capitalist and socialist programme.

This essential conflict found no mention in the March 16 People’s Assembly meeting—a pseudo-left coalition, involving Stalinists, “left” Labourites and trade union reps, and tendencies such as the Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party, Counterfire, and others.

It was silent on the actions of the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy, which have spent the last year suppressing opposition to the government's murderous herd immunity policy, and the multi-billion-pound subventions to the corporations and super-rich. With the ending of the Conservative government’s “final lockdown” as the pandemic continues to rage, several trade unions have been forced to organise ballots and even sanction walk-outs while working behind the scenes with the employers to impose the cuts demanded.

The programme of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy is pro-capitalist and corporatist—based on the ever-closer integration of the trade unions into the structures of management and the state apparatus. The People's Assembly meeting made clear that the pseudo-left “activists” support this programme and are working to impose it.

Steve Whittle, GMB rep for British Gas, described how the union suppressed opposition to management's “fire and rehire” before finally, in January, calling the present series of walkouts. Pointedly he stressed that the GMB recognised the need for “sustainable jobs” and acknowledged that there was “no point having the best paying jobs” if those jobs no longer exist. “We will be a vehicle for change and we will make difficult decisions with our workforce”, he said, before blaming the actions of British Gas on “leadership failings”. Businesses had to learn that they need their workforce onside, he said, concluding with praise for the “cross-party support” the dispute had attracted and of the need to get “people talking about it.”

Speaking on the NHS, Helen O’Connor, GMB Southern Region Organiser, condemned the government’s derisory one percent pay offer to NHS

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staff, and called for a “15 percent restorative pay rise.” She neglected to mention that the GMB, the Royal College of Nurses, and the other unions involved in health care have resolved to do absolutely nothing to mobilise against this insult, save entreating the government to think again. That is why the demand for a 15 percent rise originated outside of the unions, in a social media petition from a concerned nurse.

Joanne Harris is the vice chair of the United Left faction of Unite and a former Socialist Party member. She made brief reference to the strike by hundreds of Go North West bus drivers in Manchester, who were told in mid-February they had seven days to sign new contracts or face the sack. While management is organising strike breaking, the union is working to isolate the dispute while it tries to cut an agreement with Go North West on its “alternative plan”, which includes a pay freeze and cost cutting.

While calling for a “fight with everything we've got”, Harris’ real attitude to a militant fightback is shown by the fact that, in her capacity as moderator on the Bus Drivers in London Facebook group, she deleted an open letter from the London Bus Rank-and-File committee at Cricklewood garage calling for a London-wide strike to oppose the threat from Covid.

Ian May, another Unite rep, explained how the union had begun negotiations with French transnational RATP Dev in October 2019 but its paltry 2.2 percent offer was rejected by members. That “took us to the New Year [2020] and then Covid happened and everything got put on the back burner.” When management finally agreed to negotiations last autumn, the 2.2 percent offer “came out at 0.5 percent”, May said, which was attached to “fire and rehire” contracts.

Last Wednesday, strike action was due to take place at RATP bus company subsidiaries, London United, London Sovereign and Quality Line. But Unite suspended the action at London Sovereign and Quality Line at the last moment in response to a miserly 0.25 percent and 0.5 percent increase respectively on what was originally presented, leaving London United out on its own—a fact May neglected to mention.

Finn Brennan spoke as an ASLEF train drivers’ union rep on the London Underground. He began by noting a joint statement issued by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and Heathrow airport on behalf of the aviation industry. Although he did not provide details, this calls for a “tripartite body of government, trade unions and industry” to “guide aviation into the recovery and beyond.” This means that, while thousands of workers at London's Heathrow airport are preparing for strike action against “fire and rehire”, the TUC is in an alliance with the employers behind the scenes.

Although Brennan indicated displeasure with the TUC, its action is no different from that of ASLEF on the London Underground. In September, workers returned a 97.5 percent vote in favour of strike action to defend jobs, terms and conditions. The unions have stalled, while promoting pressure on the government for a better funding package for Transport for London, in concert with London’s Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan.

More broadly, all the rail unions have signed on to a Department for Transport initiative establishing a Rail Industry Recovery Group. Involving the unions and the private operators, it seeks “opportunities to reduce the operating costs of the railway and increase effectiveness”—measures that will come at the expense of rail workers.

The nationalist and corporatist agenda of the pseudo-left was summed up by Ian Hodson of the Bakers and Allied Food Workers Union (BFAWU). What “this country needed is unity”, Hodson said, not “bosses taking the opportunity to cut pay.” We need “employers to stand up and make sure our workers are rewarded”.

Hodson’s remarks are wholly in line with the joint statement issued by the BFAWU, Unite, USDAW and the GMB with the bosses’ Food and Drink Federation. The statement, the first of its kind, was issued during the pandemic as food workers suffered some of the highest incidences of COVID-19. It boasted of how employers and the unions are “working together to feed the nation” and for “the common good.”

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