

Britain's Trades Union Congress holds bogus "Protect the right to strike" march

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The "Protect the right to strike" march and rally held by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) on Saturday was framed as a celebration of what they claim is one of the greatest struggles in history of the British Labour movement. This was supposedly proof of their determination to take on and defeat the Conservative government's Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act, effectively outlawing strikes in key industries.

The rally marked the 40th anniversary of Margaret Thatcher's banning of trade unions at the Cheltenham-based Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) spy agency. It brought together unions leaders who have sold out every struggle of the working class for decades, including most recently the mass strike wave of 2022-23, that prove the unions will do nothing to defend the working class from the onslaught of the Sunak government and the employers.

GCHQ, with over 7,000 employees, as revealed by US National Security Agency whistle-blower Edward Snowden, is involved in the illegal mass surveillance of the entire population. It works with the US National Security Agency to monitor almost all internet activity.

In January 1984, the Thatcher government announced that it would abolish the right of GCHQ's spies to join trade unions. This was part of a broader offensive against the working class, just as the Tories were finalising their plans to take on the miners, provoking a year-long strike that began two months later.

Then TUC leader Len Murray had earlier reached an agreement with Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong allowing union membership at GCHQ based on a pledge that the unions did not interfere with its functioning. Just 14 GCHQ employees refused to give up their union membership in exchange for £1,000 and were dismissed between November 1988 to the spring of 1989.

In 1997, the ban on unions at GCHQ was rescinded by the incoming Labour government of Tony Blair in a deal with the unions which included a strike ban. Three of the sacked employees were reinstated, with the others having retired or working in different careers. Then TUC General Secretary

John Monks had told Blair, "The days when trade unions provided an adversarial opposition force are past in industry".

Today GCHQ employees are represented by the Government Communications Group, a branch of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) Union.

The campaign against the banning of the unions at GCHQ and fight to win the reinstatement for the sacked became the second longest continuously fought dispute in British trade union history. It became a cause célèbre among the union bureaucracy, but not for any principled reasons.

Above all the campaign was based on denunciations of the Tory government's "slander" against the trade unions for suggesting that they could not be trusted to defend the "national interest." That was why it was never dropped, while every other section of workers for the past 40 years was systematically betrayed. Hundreds of rallies were mounted for the 14 sacked at GCHQ by the same organisations that had left over 140,000 miners to fight alone for a year, with 20,000 injured or hospitalised, 13,000 arrested, 200 imprisoned, and five killed. The defeat of the miners led to the closure of virtually every pit in Britain within a decade.

The fact that last weekend's rally was even held at Cheltenham, and not in London or another large city, said everything about the token nature of the event. Cheltenham is a spa town in Gloucester with a population of just 118,000 and the rally involved just a few thousand bureaucrats and their hangers-on in Britain's myriad pseudo left and Stalinist groups.

The TUC organised no industrial action last year against the draconian Strikes Act, despite millions of workers being involved in walkouts against pay cuts and attacks on their conditions. Its main complaint at the time, in the words of TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak was, "If passed, this bill will prolong disputes and poison industrial relations—leading to more frequent strikes."

These same considerations of preventing Tory legislation from provoking mass opposition that the trade union leaders

will not be able to control was evident in every speech made from the platform at Saturday's rally. The collective aim was to smother the class struggle, especially by tying workers fate to the prospect of a Labour government under Sir Keir Starmer coming out of this year's general election.

A key element of Starmer's pitch to big business is that the Tories' Thatcherite mindset blinds them to the fact that attacking the right to strike and threatening the unions with massive fines, and that the trade union leaders are not "the enemy within" but the most vital instrument in policing the working class. Rather than relying on yet more inflammatory anti-strike legislation, he urged a corporatist partnership between government, employers and the trade union bureaucracy.

It was in support of this perspective that Nowak boasted that the trade unions had beaten the Tories once before (by electing Blair) and would do so again. "And this time, we won't be waiting 13 years for justice; we're going to win justice this year, when a Labour government repeals that legislation in its first 100 days."

Pledges of loyalty to the British capitalism and its state came thick and fast. Fran Heathcote, the new leader of the PCS union, declared, "Margaret Thatcher enforced a ban on trade union membership in 1984, claiming that it wasn't possible for someone to be in a union and be loyal to their country." Christine McNea of the main public sector union, Unison, denounced "this idea that somehow you can't both be a trade unionist and be loyal to your country."

Such statements were naturally made within the context of a torrent of militant rhetoric promising that the unions would fight the Tory legislation to the death. Maryam Eslamdoust, general secretary of the TSSA while collar rail union, aped Churchill, declaring, "We will challenge it in the courts, in parliament and on the streets. We'll defy it in our workplaces, in our unions, and in our actions. We will overturn it with our power, our unity and our solidarity."

Not to be outdone NASUWT education union General Secretary Patrick Roach likely unknowingly, conjured Leon Trotsky with his pledge, "We will not rest until all anti-union, all anti-worker laws are consigned to the dustbin of history."

Mick Lynch, the leader of the Rail Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, fresh from selling out national strikes against Network Rail and the train operating companies, spoke meaninglessly of placing pressure on "politicians, whether they're Tories, nationalist, Labour, whatever they want to call themselves, if they want working class votes they have to deliver a working class agenda."

Jo Grady, general secretary of the University and College Union, spoke of the "125,000 education workers" she represents, "who have taken unprecedented amounts of

strike action over the past few years."

"As the daughter of a miner, another dispute that took place 40 years ago, I will never bend my knee to that mob," she proclaimed.

Grady was born in 1985 and her father became a publican after the miners defeat. She has no real recollection of the miners' strike and cannot address its betrayal by the trade unions, any more than she can account for the rotten sellouts of the education strikes she has engineered.

Starmer's pledge to repeal the Minimum Service Levels legislation and other measures brought in by the Tories since 2016 is in any event not worth a damn. Moreover, it keeps in place all the Tory anti-strike legislation passed by Thatcher and kept intact by the Blair and Brown Labour governments in their 13 years in office, including the ban on secondary strike action.

Faced with a mounting economic crisis and demands for savage austerity, fueled by the demands of war in Ukraine and now the Middle East, any corporatist alliance between Labour and the unions will be dedicated to continuing and deepening the assault on the working class that has already produced the greatest cost of living crisis in decades.

Rather than wait for a general election, workers must begin preparations for the unified, all-out action necessary to defeat the government's anti-strike laws, defend pay, jobs and conditions and vital social services and to mobilise alongside workers internationally against militarism and war. This means building new rank-and-file committees to organise in defiance of the union bureaucracy. It means rallying to the political leadership of the Socialist Equality Party.



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