

British TUC makes hollow general strike threat

By Julie Hyland
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The vote by the annual conference of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for “coordinated action where possible” over government pay restraint—including “the consideration and practicalities of a general strike”—should be treated with contempt.

It is almost two years since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition began implementing its austerity measures—the largest cuts in public spending since the 1930s. Since then, hundreds of thousands of jobs have been destroyed and the wages of many workers frozen or slashed.

In the public sector alone, the government has successfully pushed through its assault on pensions—making employees pay more and work longer for less pay on retirement. Now it has announced that a three-year pay freeze will be effectively extended for a further two years, capping pay rises for 2014 and 2015 at one percent.

At last year’s conference, the TUC and its associated unions pledged to fight the attack on pensions. It did nothing, save a few token demonstrations and rallies whose purpose was to provide a smokescreen for the unions’ collaboration with the coalition’s cuts.

Almost immediately after the two million-strong day of action on November 30, most of the unions went into sectional talks with the government, ensuring that the pension changes were put in place.

The unions’ actions have emboldened the government to press ahead with its assault on pay. In addition to extending pay restraint, it intends to move towards regional pay settlements.

In South West England, a consortium of 19 National Health Service Trust managements have established a pay cartel aimed at breaking up pay and conditions, which will then be rolled out into a national offensive against NHS workers. Not a word was said about this at

the TUC conference because, just as with pensions, the unions have no intention of fighting the assault on pay.

The resolution proposed by the largest public-sector union Unison, together with the GMB, speaks only in the vaguest terms of supporting workers “who take industrial action against cuts or attacks on pay, jobs, pensions or conditions of service.”

Unison General Secretary Dave Prentis declared to conference, “Now is the time for action.”

In reality, Unison and the GMB have not announced any dates for action, stating only that some protests could take place next April if negotiations with the government fail.

Unison and the GMB had abstained on the resolution on “the consideration and practicalities of a general strike” when it was discussed the week earlier at a meeting of a TUC general council. It was proposed by the Prison Officers Association (POA), which is dominated by the pseudo-left Socialist Party. Although passed at conference, with several unions dissenting, it is as worthless as the paper it is written on.

The motion is the outcome of efforts by the pseudo-left groups, in particular the SP and the Socialist Workers Party, to provide the TUC with the fig leaf of an oppositional stance. To this end, the SP organised a lobby by its National Shop Stewards Network outside the TUC conference to call for support for the POA resolution and for a 24-hour “general strike.”

The lobby provided a platform for numerous fake left union leaders, such as Mark Serwotka, head of the Public and Commercial Services union, and Bob Crow of the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union.

The SP declared that the motion’s passage was a “great step forward in the battle that has been waged to push the leaders of the TUC towards mobilising the

weight of the trade movement against the government's cuts agenda."

Similarly, *Socialist Worker* claimed that the last 18 months had shown "that the trade union bureaucracy can be pressured to fight", even while acknowledging that the unions had sabotaged opposition to the government's attack on pensions.

"The scale of the government's attacks and the anger and desperation of many union members has forced their hand", it went on.

The pseudo-left are well aware that the real response of the trade unions to their members' "anger and desperation" will be to redouble their collusion with the government and the employers.

In his address, outgoing TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber called for an "Olympic-style national crusade" to build up the "industrial strength" of the UK economy.

Barber, who sat on the Court of the Bank of England before being replaced on it this year by Unison leader Dave Prentis, knows that such a "crusade" to improve the competitiveness of British capital against its major rivals can be done only at the expense of workers' living standards.

The pseudo-left groups are fully integrated into this corporatist set-up. Not only are they the main political apologists for the connivance of the trade union bureaucracy, but they make up a large proportion of its number and are directly involved in its treachery.

That's why the SP-inspired POA motion rubber-stamped the "leading" role of the TUC. Even on the toothless commitment to "far reaching campaigns", including considering the "practicalities" of a general strike, it made sure to let the TUC off the hook—assigning this responsibility to a "coalition of resistance."

The "coalition of resistance" is a code word for an amalgam of pseudo-left groups committed to upholding the authority of the trade unions under all conditions and suppressing a rank-and-file rebellion.

The SP and the SWP are attempting to replicate the role they played in the pensions dispute. Then they worked to build up last November's day of action, claiming it would be the springboard for an offensive by the trade unions. Now they claim that the TUC-organised demonstration against pay restraint on October 20 will be the launch of a "hot autumn."

To back up their specious claims, they cite the decision of the largest teaching unions—the NUT and the NASUWT—to implement a work-to-rule from September 26.

Serwotka told the TUC that strikes should be scheduled for soon after the October 20 protest. "We cannot wait for a date in the future. We have to react with a bit more urgency", he said.

But again, Serwotka set no strike date for his union, saying only that it would participate in action called by the NUT and NASUWT.

The teaching unions, however, have specified that their work-to-rule will involve only "minimum disruption". As for the claim that the teaching unions' decision marks the start of "coordinated strike action", the SP's Martin Powell Davies, who sits on the NUT executive committee, made clear how bankrupt this is.

"In the event that the government shows no evidence of moving on our concerns", he wrote on his blog, the NUT would approach the NASUWT "with a view to moving to a programme of discontinuous strike action later this term."

In other words, all that is being held out are limited, locally-based protests aimed at wearing down workers' resistance and politically subordinating them to the Labour Party and its allies in the TUC. The NASUWT opposed the POA motion for a general strike.

The real measure of the TUC was made clear in its invitation to Ed Balls, Labour's treasury spokesman. Balls, who denounced any threat of strike action, gave his support to the freeze on public sector pay—which was initiated under Labour—and pledged that a Labour government would implement cuts. On spending and wages there would be "disappointments and difficult decisions from which we will not flinch", he said.

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