

Pseudo-left groups cover for a rout engineered by Britain's unions

By Paul Mitchell
11 November 2013

A month ago the pseudo-left groups, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP), declared that a series of strikes called for the end of October signalled a new fight-back by the trade unions. These strikes were held up as proof of the SWP's verdict on September's Trades Union Congress (TUC) that union leaders had pledged to "wage war on the politics of austerity".

Workers voted by huge margins for action in schools, universities and colleges, Royal Mail, the fire and probation services, the Grangemouth oil refinery, and elsewhere against cuts in wages and conditions and privatisation of public services.

Within the space of two weeks, however, one union after another capitulated, calling off 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.

Following this rout, the pseudo-left groups have desperately sought to cover the exposed rear of the trade union bureaucracy, urging workers to "keep the faith" in the effectiveness of action by the trade unions.

The most grotesque of the recent capitulations took place on October 24, when the Unite union ended the Grangemouth dispute after the petrochemical giant Ineos threatened to permanently close the oil refinery if wages and conditions were not cut. Workers had defeated similar threats in 2008 with a strike and voted to strike again this time—despite the huge pressure from the company, UK and Scottish governments and media. But within the space of 24 hours, Unite's General Secretary Len McCluskey gave the company all it wanted and more: signing a "survival plan" involving a three-year pay freeze and no-strike deal, cuts to bonuses of up to £15,000, the gutting of the final salary pension scheme, and an end to union conveners at the plant.

Following his betrayal, McCluskey was treated to respectful criticism by the pseudo-left.

His rise was in fact made possible in no small part by their efforts in the past.

The SWP invited him to its annual Marxism festivals and used his "talk about" a general strike and "warnings" to Labour Party leader Ed Miliband on the need to break from neoliberalism to promote him as a fighting trade union leader. McCluskey makes no mention of a general strike these days and in early October proclaimed Miliband as "a real leader" who was "beginning to seal the deal with working people."

Writing in *Socialist Worker* ("Grangemouth was no test of

strength", October 29), SWP leader Alex Callinicos again dubbed McCluskey "the most vocally left wing major union leader for a generation". However, with no trace of irony, he now comments, "The problem is that McCluskey's radicalism has been mainly at the level of words".

McCluskey "threw in the towel without a fight", Callinicos declares, blaming this largely on the workers themselves: "More than anything else, the resulting decline of rank and file power made possible the defeat of the miners, and of many other groups of workers". His conclusion is that the "rebuilding" of rank and file organisation "is essential if we are not to remain dependent on trade union leaders who almost without fail disappoint us".

The SWP's assertion that workers have only themselves to blame is summed up in the last line of an October 29 *Socialist Worker* comment: "Workers can do much better if they stand up to bosses—and to union leaders who throw away the chance to resist".

"Despite McCluskey's often fiery rhetoric, his strategy rests on winning a Labour election victory, not on workers' struggle", the SWP states. But its answer is that, "Organising for rank and file workers to have confidence to force their leaders to lead, and fight independently if they won't, is not something that happens overnight. There are no short cuts".

McCluskey also has a long association with the SP, stretching back to the 1980s. He learned early on that its support would facilitate his rise through the ranks of the bureaucracy. In January, SP General Secretary Peter Taaffe met with McCluskey and endorsed his anti-democratic bid to bring forward by three years the next election for his post in order to secure for himself a longer term in office.

Due to its publishing schedule, the SP was perhaps even more embarrassed by events than the SWP. Its October 30 edition led with a breathless piece by Rob Williams, SP trade union organiser, entitled "Striking back!" It listed some of the planned strikes, trying to avoid mentioning the ones that had been called off.

Williams did, however, report that "CWU postal workers* and Crown Post Office workers are also out on Monday to send a defiant message to the government after Vince Cable's give-away sell-off of Royal Mail and the closure of post offices".

The asterisk in the online edition pointed to a footnote stating: "Since this article was written, the CWU strike on 4th November has been cancelled". It politely invited readers to "click here for the CWU press release"!

The SP still seeks to deflect criticism away from the Unite leader

claiming, “Under the stewardship of Len McCluskey there has been a change in the culture of Unite”. It offers as proof “important victories, including on the Besna [construction workers pay and conditions contract] and the blacklisting campaign among others”.

The SP does not even make a token call for rank-and-file action, but calls instead for reinvigorating the shop stewards movement. In a statement, “Trade unions must learn lessons from Grangemouth setback”, posted October 24, the Socialist Party Scotland declares that shop stewards “will be key to rebuilding trade union strength at Grangemouth following this defeat”, and organising an “occupation of an appropriate part of the site”.

This in turn would “gain mass support and apply huge political pressure on the Scottish government to carry through the nationalisation of the plant”.

As if this wasn’t enough sycophantic nonsense, the SP then calls on the Scottish TUC to call an “immediate council of war” and on Unite to “come out clearly in favour of a new mass workers’ party, public ownership and a real political alternative to the austerity agenda”.

The SWP and the SP know very well that their hysterical calls to action—when directed at the trade union leader—are so much hot air. We are now in the fifth year of the most severe austerity measures since the 1930s, in which the trade unions have again and again refused to lift a finger against the assault on jobs, wages and conditions. Living standards in the UK have fallen for longer than at any time in over a century. Privatisation of public services has spiralled, with forecasts suggesting up to 1.2 million public sector jobs will have been destroyed by 2018.

Throughout the pseudo-left, groups hailed first the one-day national strike against public sector pension cuts in 2011 as proof the TUC could be relied upon to lead a fight. Instead, all the unions involved made separate deals with the government, in which they imposed all their demands.

Then, after last year’s TUC conference, they promoted a resolution for the consideration of “co-ordinated strike action” and the “practicalities of a general strike” as the next beginning of a “fight back”. In the year since, there has been no “co-ordinated strike action” whatsoever, and all talk of a general strike has been dropped. Instead the number of days lost to strike action in 2012 fell to 250,000—one of the lowest on record.

The calls for “rank-and-file” action by the SWP or for rebuilding the shop stewards movement are two versions of the same essential fraud. Both assert that a little “pressure from below” will force the unions and their leaders—who are always presented as the sacrosanct representatives of the working class—to change course.

The one example of a successful application of this strategy cited by the SP—the Besna dispute and the campaign against blacklisting in the construction industry—is a lie.

In Besna, the SP and SWP turned electricians—who had founded a rank-and-file committee to combat the unions’ years of collaboration with the construction corporations—back behind the bureaucracy and a campaign to recruit new union members. The union proceeded after months of delay to hold a strike ballot of roughly half the electricians employed at just one company, before

calling off any action following a High Court ruling.

The extent of the “victory” of the blacklisting campaign was indicated this week by victimised workers walking out on the first round of talks with the blacklist compensation scheme. One worker declared, “These are not proposals designed for genuine negotiations. It is a piss-take masquerading as a publicity stunt”.

The pseudo-left groups are not simply covering up for the betrayals of others; they are actively carrying them out.

Many of the top personnel of the pseudo-left groups enjoy privileged positions within the highest echelons of the trade union apparatus. Many more operate in a more junior capacity. All are tasked in return with painting policies, programmes and individuals that are virulently hostile to even the most basic interests of working class in “left” or at times even socialist colours.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to have no confidence in the unions and to reject the claims of the pseudo-left tendencies that they are the vehicle through which to defend anything at all. Their constant and miserable history of capitulation, year after year, expresses the completed transformation of the trade unions into industrial enforcers concerned primarily with the suppression of workers’ struggles on behalf of the employers.

There is a pressing need to mobilise a genuine opposition by setting up rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to unite with workers and local communities fighting to defend jobs and services, against the government’s brutal austerity measures. This must be based on a socialist political perspective for the creation of a genuine workers’ party that would of necessity be built in direct opposition to the trade unions, not by a humble appeal for their support.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>