

After the march - the return of the “dented shield”?

It was an impressive demonstration, probably the largest that the trades unions have ever organised in Britain, somewhere in the region of 500,000. You had to go on a route-march to get onto the march and some people never got to Hyde Park because they had to leave to catch their transport back. The front to the back of the march took some five hours. The march surely showed the potential for building a movement against the coalition government, but what comes next?

Whilst the event was entitled “March for the Alternative”, the nature of the alternative was not clear. Or more accurately the messages in relation to alternatives were mixed. Indeed the very selection of the speakers on the platform told us much about the approach of the TUC. Whilst Mark Serwotka was a speaker from the more radical wing of the trades unions, Bob Crow and Matt Wrack did not merit a place on the platform. Ed Milliband did. His message, of course, was that the cuts were “too deep, too fast”, compared to Serwotka’s which was that the cuts weren’t necessary.

The response of two of the biggest (Labour affiliated) unions to the march does not deviate from Labour’s policy of “halving of the deficit in four years”. In fact UNISWON General Secretary Dave Prentis said that Tories are cutting the deficit “too deep, too fast”. This accepts the proposition that the problem we face is one of a “spending deficit” rather than a “revenue deficit” as, for instance, Richard Murphy (the tax expert who has done work for the TUC) suggests it is.

As to what happens next, the differences are stark. Rather than “striking together” as Serwotka suggested, both UNISON and the GMB are focused on the May local council elections. Paul Kenny describes these elections as “the next step”. Prentis also focuses on them. What happens in the meantime as tens of thousands of job cuts kick in? On this these two General Secretaries are silent.

It is true that the May elections offer the opportunity to give the Tories and the Liberal Democrats a bloody nose. But the ‘realist’ Prentis is completely unrealistic when he suggests that our job is to “pressure the government into seeing there is an alternative” to their economic programme. Pressure may lead them to retreat in this or that aspect of their policy, such as in relation to the NHS (e.g Lansley’s concession over competition by price, and now the ‘pause’) but the very future of the coalition was premised on the supposed *necessity* of its programme, the modernised TINA.

Then again, let’s suppose that the coalition crumbles and there is a General Election. What will Labour do if elected to government? It will most likely introduce a scaled down cuts programme. Is this acceptable to the unions? In the case of the NHS Labour’s programme included a £20 billion cut in NHS expenditure. The unions are now calling these ‘Tory cuts’.

The major affiliated unions have yet to give any indication as to what they would want such a government to do. So long as they remain affiliated to Labour should they not be putting forward the bones of the sort of government programme which would be in the interests of their members? Should they not be demanding a break with the politics of Blair/Brown? Is

their reluctance because they do not want to highlight disagreements with Milliband?

In local government where the scale of the cuts is 28% over 4 years, the main unions are giving Labour Councils an easy ride. In a recent briefing note by Heather Wakefield, national officer responsible for local government, UNISON addresses its demands on Labour councillors.

She says:

“Labour councillors need to show their local communities and their workforce that having a Labour council will make a difference when faced with the cuts forced on them by the Tory-led Coalition. We would like to see open and effective engagement with the workforce and trade unions, in a joint effort to defend services, jobs, pay and pensions. Labour councils need to be out in their local communities, campaigning against the vicious Government cuts, not just being seen to manage them. We want local people to know who is destroying their services and erasing local jobs and Labour councils which look for positive alternatives.”

Let's unpick that a little. She wants them to “see an open and effective engagement with the workforce and trades unions” in “a joint effort to defend services, jobs, pay and pensions”. How to square the circle here? How can you defend services and jobs at the same time you are cutting them? How can Labour Councils “campaign against the vicious Government cuts” by implementing them.

How should the trades unions respond? If they strike in defence of their jobs and services they will be striking against Labour Councils as well as Tory ones. How can you 'engage' with people who are cutting your jobs?

Wakefield wants Labour councils to:

- "help manage the current difficult financial situation.”
- "Carry out an economic and social audit of all cuts to jobs, pay and conditions and services before they are implemented”
- "Work with local businesses to influence the Government’s agenda”
- "Work with community groups and the voluntary sector to identify ways of maintaining key services”
- "Draw up and publicise a ‘needs’ budget for your council area to show how the cuts will impact and to tell local people about Labour’s alternative for your community”
- "Work with UNISON and the other unions to examine and agree options for dealing with the Coalition cuts”

Essentially what we have here is the return of the “dented shield”. This was an expression of Neil Kinnock's around the time of the rate-capping struggle in the 1980's. We have to stay within the law – better a dented shield than no shield at all, said Kinnock.

The debate over whether or not Labour Councils should implement the cuts is in some respects academic. If they were going to act in the interests of the working class they would refuse to implement government cuts, even if they were turfed out of office.

However, given the political make up of Labour Councils and Councillors there was never any prospect of such a stance being taken. They are too compromised. Most of them went along with Blairism. They tend to see themselves as administrators rather than as political representatives of the working class. People who have slavishly followed what the Blair/Brown government told them to do are not about to suddenly turn into class fighters.

Having said that, the position of the major unions, certainly the Labour affiliated ones, contradicts all their rhetoric about fighting the government. If you accept cuts in service how can you build an alliance with service users?

Let's look at two examples of the approach of the unions to the problem at the local level, one in local government, the other in the NHS.

In Scottish Borders Council the unions have reached an agreement on a "no compulsory redundancy deal". What have they given up for this commitment? They have agreed a three year pay freeze which means accepting somewhere in the region a 10-15% cut in the value of their wage (depending on the rate of inflation). They have agreed to voluntary redundancies, which means accepting an intensification of the labour of the staff who remain.

I don't know how many jobs will be lost but given the scale of the local government cut at 28% over four years, it will hardly be minor tinkering. In return for this agreement the unions have in effect abandoned any struggle in defence of services, which puts an end to the prospect of an alliance with service users.

The situation in the NHS is illustrated by the position taken by the UNISON branch of Universities Hospital Birmingham, faced with a 17% cut in budget. In order to find out what was being cut by their 'partners' at the Trust the branch had to put in a Freedom of Information request. They discovered that elective surgery (which could mean planned heart, kidney, liver and spinal operations) is being cut, with plans to reduce admissions by 3,000. In addition, follow up on out-patients, is to be cut from 125,000 in 2010/11 to 88,000 in 2011/12.

The branch chair is quoted as saying that UNISON will stick up for staff "to make sure we don't shoulder the burden of the bankers' crisis and the expensive Tory reforms". However, he then declares "we are ready to work in partnership with the Trust to protect staff and services we provide to the public".

But the Trust management is going to implement 17% cuts. How can you work with it to defend jobs and services in such a context? Of course, the management will say that this is what we are being given by the PCT. That makes no difference to the staff or the patients. The management cannot both save this money and carry out their "duty to ensure quality patient care".

Once again, if the unions accept cuts they cannot build an alliance with NHS supporters and patients to defend services. Surely the starting point of any independent policy is to say we will not accept these cuts and we will campaign against them. But such a stance is hampered by the 'partnership' with NHS management.

The contradiction in the position of the health unions is reflected in its continued participation in a 'partnership' with a government which is threatening the very future of the NHS and a management which is implementing unprecedented cuts.

Is it unrealistic to oppose all cuts? Aren't the unions too weak to stop them? In response to this I would say that even if the unions are not strong enough to stop the cuts that is no reason to collaborate with their introduction. The government will attempt to present the unions as merely acting out of self-interest. Unless they act in defence of public services how can they challenge this? If you are not strong enough to stop cuts being implemented you can still condemn them and warn of their consequences.

The scale of the cuts will deliver a social disaster in the lives of the most vulnerable and oppressed members of our society. Way back in September of last year when the TUC voted almost unanimously to "support and coordinate campaigning and joint union industrial action, nationally and locally, in opposition to attacks on jobs, pensions, pay, or public services", many trade union leaders made speeches about an alliance with service users. But how can you build such an alliance if you go along with cuts which will have a drastic impact on those users?

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