Waiting for Godot – the TUC, a 'general strike' and the coalition government

At the September TUC Congress a resolution was passed, supported by all the major unions, including the 'big three' (UNISON, UNITE, GMB), which committed it to "examine the practicalities of organising a general strike" against the government's austerity programme. If the resolution had been for a general strike then it would almost certainly not have been passed. It was a vote to examine the possibilities without a commitment to do anything, so for some it cost nothing to raise their hands for it. After all, the results of a consultation might give the answer that the members did not support such an idea, or that it might be found to be 'impractical'.

You don't need to be a genius to work out what the practicalities are. 'Political' strikes are illegal in Britain, so the unions have the choice of ignoring the law and trying to get their members out without balloting or they will have to organise simultaneous ballots for strike action of individual unions. The only significant 'illegal' action which has taken place has been that carried out by the Prison Officers Association and that in the engineering construction industry. The POA is a very particular union which operates in just one 'industry' and its members are very angry about the right to strike having been taken away from them. The action in engineering construction was based on rank and file mobilisation, with very experienced reps, in an industry where the work is time limited and action by workers can have real leverage over their employers in an industry dominated by contracting.

There is no sign that any of the unions, with the possible exception of the POA, are prepared to call out their members without a ballot. In reality if there is to be any effort to call a 'general strike', some of them will organise a coordinated ballot, if they do it at all. But what will they ballot their members on? For action to be 'protected' by law it has to be an 'industrial' dispute with their employer. This shouldn't be a problem in the public sector since union members are facing unprecedented cuts in jobs and services. Another big round of cuts will be programmed in for next April. Public sector workers can be balloted for action against these, whether they are in the civil service, local government, the NHS or wherever.

The private sector presents a problem. Solidarity action is illegal so union members could not be balloted for action against public sector cuts since the courts would declare it illegal. They can only be balloted in furtherance of an 'industrial' dispute with their own employer. Union density is only 15% in the private sector, so the chances of organising unofficial action are not good.

Then you have to ask the question are the unions, at the official national level, serious about this? The coordinated action which took place over public sector pensions, following simultaneous ballots, was abandoned after only one day of action. "One day will not be enough" said hard talking Dave Prentis in one of his set piece 'militant' speeches. However, UNISON leaders led the retreat and the 'big three' accepted that young workers
would have to work until 68 to get their pension: work longer and pay more for a smaller pension. Will they act any differently over the 'general strike'?

Some organisations on the left seem to think that a 'general strike' is the key to advancing the struggle against the coalition government. It's difficult to understand their infatuation with a 'general strike'. Is coordinated action any less radical if it doesn't have the name of 'general strike' attached to it? It's not as if we have a tradition of organising general strikes in Britain, is it? The only one we had was nearly 90 years ago, and that was a big defeat, in part because it was placed under the control of the TUC leaders. Then again there can be all manner of general strikes; different forms, with different aims. In South Africa, for instance, the trade union federation COSATU has used 'general strikes' as safety valves, to give the impression to their members that they are doing something when the real purpose was to prevent an explosion which would lead to a break with the ANC government and its neo-liberal policy.

**The wrong focus**

What most supporters of the call for a 'general strike' are proposing is a 24 hour protest strike. A protest is better than quiescence, but the focus on the call for a 24 hour general strike is in my view the wrong focus. Attention should be concentrated on building resistance at the workplace and industrial level to job and service cuts. Without that then a 24 hour 'general strike' would be a gesture at best.

At the TUC demonstration Mark Serwotka made the point that “we are in a worse position than we were 18 months ago”. He was right, though some refuse to face up to the truth of this. The coalition government has launched an unprecedented attack on the working class, the poor, and the trades unions. The cuts in public sector spending are very deep - 28% over 4 years in local government - yet there has been little response from the unions. In local government here has not been a single authority in which the unions have been able to organise strike action across the workforce in defence of jobs and services. What resistance there has been is sectional, and not very widespread. The outcome of the pension dispute underlined to the members the failure of such limited action. That was reflected in the steep decline in the turnout for the recent TUC demonstration which was probably only around a third of the size of the turnout 18 months earlier. Members know that one day strikes rarely have any impact on government policy and they know that the concessions 'won' in the pension dispute have been dishonestly dressed up by the union leaders to be more than they were.

In the NHS the unions are even weaker. The NHS is being destroyed before our very eyes, with Trusts fighting each other for survival and cutting the service they provide to a degree never seen before. There has been little response from the unions with only very localised resistance. The reason for this quiescence can be found in the relationship between the health service unions and New Labour. There was a great deal of opposition to New Labour's cuts in the NHS, with big campaigns against closures, and even in one case an MP elected around a campaign against a hospital closure. Yet the complaint of activists in many areas was the difficulty of getting the health union local branches
involved in their campaigns.

At the time of the Agenda for Change agreement the health service unions signed up to 'partnership' arrangements in support of 'reform' of the service. However, the reform in reality meant opening up the NHS to private providers. The interests of Labour were placed above the interests of union members and the defence of the NHS. The campaign against Foundation hospitals was dropped when Agenda for Change was signed.

**Health service unions accept £20 billion cuts**

In the February before the General Election in 2010, the unions signed up to "The principles for the NHS - Meeting the Challenge in Partnership." The agreement was based on the acceptance that £20 billion in cuts were necessary to meet the "productivity challenge". The union leaders did not want a dispute with the New Labour government in the run up to the General Election so they accepted an unprecedented level of cuts.

When the coalition government came to power the unions continued to sit in the "Social Partnership Forum". Their 'partners' were the management implementing £20 billion of cuts and the coalition government! They haven't opposed cuts when they were delivered by the coalition. In September 2010 they signed up to a "Mutually Agreed Resignation Scheme" (MARS), which was meant to be a one-off agreement. Essentially the unions enabled Trusts to get away with paying less than the normal redundancy terms if some members of staff were so desperate to get out that they would give up those terms.

The agreement said:

"The NHS is facing tough challenges to achieve efficiency savings and 'to do more with less'. To support Trusts in meeting these challenges there will be a nationally agreed Mutually Agreed Resignation Scheme (MARS). The national MARS has been developed in partnership with the Social Partnership Forum to help employers manage cost reductions and the workforce implications of redesigning services." (My emphasis)

In other words it was designed to help management get rid of staff on the cheap. The unions had signed up to helping management to achieve "efficiency savings". It was supposedly a one-off agreement and time limited, but it created a bad precedent, suspending existing terms and conditions in relation to redundancy. It's is hardly any wonder that they have not mobilised their members against the cuts. Ever since they signed up to 'partnership' their organisation in the Trusts has operated as if they share interests in common with the management. The weakness of union organisation in the workplace is directly related to their involvement in the 'partnership' arrangements. Despite the fact that the coalition government's policy is destroying the NHS the health service unions still have refused to abandon the partnership arrangements. So long as they refuse to do so then they will be unable to build combative and independent unions with active bases in the workplace. The first step to doing that would be to state unequivocally that the £20 billion efficiency savings are not necessary and they should be opposed.

The turnout in the ballot in the NHS for strike action in defence of their pension was only
25%. Members know the action was not successful or at best patchy. How can you mobilise members for a 'general strike' when the unions are making no serious effort to mobilise them to defend their jobs and the services they provide? There needs to be a concerted campaign to break the unions from the self-imposed shackles of 'partnership'.

"Winning" in the Postal market

How are the unions doing in the Post Office? Five years or so ago CWU members in the Post Office used to deliver the majority of unofficial action which took place in the UK. There was a tradition of boycotting post which came from a strike bound area, as well as unofficial action in defence of victimised members. However, the CWU, in the face of liberalisation of the service, threw in its lot with the management, accepting that the union would work with them to compete 'successfully' in the new market place. That meant collaborating in 'productivity' measures to cut the workforce. In some areas the management employs 'temporary' workers who have been employed in some cases for over two years. The identification of the interests of the members with the 'success' of the company in the new market has greatly undermined the independence of the union and weakened its workplace organisation.

In schools the government has been able to push through a big wave of Academies without any industrial response.

On the legal front the government has already changed the law so that workers do not qualify for employment rights until they have worked for their employer for 2 years. Even under New Labour when the qualifying period was one year it was common for employers to sack people after 11 months only to reemploy them later in order to avoid them qualifying for employment rights. They will now be able to get rid of them before the 2 year deadline.

Part of the problem we face is the scale of the attacks which the government is launching. It's difficult to fight on so many fronts at once. The government is not only attacking the trades unions but what remains of the social gains that the labour movement won. As well as committing to no "top-down reorganisations" in the NHS before the last general election the Tories said they had no plans to change tenancy rights for Council and Housing Association tenants. Swiftly abandoning this pledge, as they did with the NHS, they are now giving Councils the right to introduce 'fixed term tenancies' which involve means testing Council housing and giving Councils the right to evict tenants who have done nothing wrong. At the same time they are organising a war against the poor with all manner of benefit cuts, such as the 'bedroom tax' and the Council Tax benefit cut.

'General Strike'

Trade union activists faced with this unprecedented offensive on their organisations, the services they provide in the public sector, and what remain of the social gains of the labour movement, are desperately frustrated with the situation and the weakness of the response by the unions. That is one reason why the call for a 'general strike' has some resonance amongst activists. The demand of the moment for some is “let the TUC name the day".
However, a realistic strategy cannot be based on wishful thinking. It’s a bit like waiting for Godot. He won’t turn up. And what then?

I have yet to read any serious practical consideration of how a ‘general strike’ would be organised. Union organisation is far too weak to be in a position to mobilise unofficial walk-outs on any large scale. And the major trades unions will not countenance anything which will bring them in breach of the law. Making the focus of building resistance to the government on action by the TUC is misguided, not only because it cannot call strikes, but because of the divisions amongst the unions. Placing hopes on unions that are not serious about mobilising their members is misguided. The rhetoric of some union leaders is just that: words. The danger is that those unions that want to take action will be left hanging as PCS was in the pensions dispute.

‘Winning back Labour’

The ‘big three’ are each in their own way devoting time, effort and money, to a campaign to ‘win back Labour’. Whether you think this is possible or not, they are not even serious in their endeavour. Before the recent Labour conference a number of General Secretaries made critical remarks about Labour’s overall policy, especially it’s support for the coalition government's public sector wage freeze. It was said to have “lost touch with workers”. Yet no sooner had Ed Miliband made his “One Nation Labour” speech than these self-same people were telling their members that Miliband had given workers ‘hope’. Well, not quite all workers, because even Dave Prentis had to say that he had not given public sector workers any hope as Labour was continuing to support a freeze of their pay.

Despite the fact that Miliband and Balls had reiterated their support for the wage freeze, these same critics lined up to say what a wonderful chap Ed was. Apparently drawing on Disraeli for inspiration was "the best speech from a labour leader I have heard", according to Len McCluskey, the man who had been hinting at possible disaffiliation from the Labour Party. "Working class people (unless they work in the public sector, presumably) can feel that the party is back on their side." Ed had promised to "restore our country to its people", though sadly not its railways, its gas, its water, or its electricity.

As Brendan Barber approaches his fond farewell as TUC General Secretary he insisted that Ed "spelled out a compelling vision" of the new Britain we need to build, "based on fairness and one nation social solidarity". Yes, one nation together, exploitative employers and exploited workers, all sharing the same interests, together in their sinking boat.

Paul Kenny who had earlier in the year raised a question mark over affiliation to Labour, was beside himself with enthusiasm. He hoped that the public would get a glimpse of what a “fantastic Prime Minister” Ed would make. And the public sector workers freeze? Doesn't it make you confident that these fierce critics of Labour are at this very minute "considering the practicalities of organisng a general strike".

Wishful thinking and radical rhetoric is no substitute for action

The demand for a 24 hour 'general strike' is really a combination of wishful thinking and
radical rhetoric. A 24 hour protest strike, even if you stick the label 'general strike' on it, is hardly likely to shake the government, especially when the unions are divided. To focus on the demand that "the TUC must name the day" is a recipe for passivity; waiting for the TUC to act when there is little chance that it will. What do those unions that want to mobilise their members do if the TUC’s deliberations come to the decision that it's not practical? How long are they prepared to wait?

In my view the focus should be on building resistance to the cuts in jobs, services and the welfare attacks on the poor. The unions have so far failed to build an alliance between themselves and the service users, and the poor who are facing an unprecedented government assault on their welfare benefits. This is partly the result of lack of leadership, of weak organisation on the ground, and above all lack of perspective. A paradox of the current situation is that a weak and divided government is launching a widespread offensive against public services, the poor and the trades unions. It has no democratic legitimacy, both from the point of view of a lack of mandate, and because key elements of its programme were not presented to the electorate. But the unions affiliated to Labour have one eye on the next general election and place their hopes more on Labour being elected than they do on organising their members for a serious struggle against the government. Hence all the tosh about what a friend we have in 'Ed' even though he supports a continued freeze of public sector workers wages.

The same political problem presents itself to the unions in local government where the biggest cuts are being engineered by the government and implemented by Labour Councils. The level of cuts is a social disaster in the making. But do the unions accept that Labour Councils have to make cuts or do they build industrial action against them? The danger is that the members will view job losses as inevitable and the unions powerless to do anything about them.

What we can be certain about is that unless there is a serious fightback which heightens the crisis of the government then the unions will be even weaker by the time of the next general election, if the coalition government is able to survive for its full term. To wait for the next election and a Miliband government would be passivity of the worst type for which the working class and poor will pay a high price.

For those who want a radicalised trade union movement, with independent and fighting workplace organisation, is it not more important that they concentrate their efforts on campaigning for a break with partnership in the NHS and for industrial action against job losses and service cuts rather than the chimera of a 'general strike' led by the TUC? Is it not more important for those in local government to campaign for action against the job and service cuts, be they implemented by Tory or Labour Councils? If there is no serious resistance to all this then a 24 hour protest strike will not serve as a focus around which a powerful fightback can be built.

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