British Political perspectives

Workers Power Fri, 19/08/2011 - 15:54
Workers Power

Political perspectives passed by the 2011 Workers Power conference in June

Political situation

At last year’s conference we were in a very different situation to the one which we find ourselves in this year. In the dying days of the Labour government, the working class awaited with trepidation the likely election of a Tory administration, with public discussion around cuts yet to translate into the historic attacks on the public sector now underway. The economy was still in recession, the most serious slump in post-war British history, which had seen the return of mass unemployment, and popular anger against bankers and the system. Crucially, despite the working class, particularly workers in the private sector, being made to pay the costs of the crisis through wage repression and mass unemployment, we had not yet seen resistance on a truly mass scale.

Now that has changed. The magnificent student revolt of winter 2010 represented an enormous upsurge of spontaneous anger against the system. Once again youth led the way? sending the message to millions of workers that it was possible to fight. Later in March 2011, the working class entered the scene in huge numbers, as half a million joined the TUC demonstration in one of the biggest mobilisations of the unions in British history. The question of mass resistance, up to and including a general strike to bring down the government, has been posed starkly by these events and this has found its partial reflection in moves towards co-ordinated industrial action over pensions by the public sector unions.

In many respects the ?March for the Alternative? had the feel of a ?European? demonstration, with the march led off by very large, tightly stewarded blocks for each of the unions, while around London during the day and into the evening various skirmishes broke out between the radical youth/anarchists, which were predictably condemned by the TUC et al.

It was also significant for being the first major mobilisation that the Labour Party had undertaken in a generation. Ed Miliband spoke from the platform, saying little of substance and focusing on windy rhetoric about how the demo stood in the tradition of the 20th century?s ?great social movements?, i.e. anti-apartheid, civil rights, etc. Labour Party banners also proliferated across the route of the march, but most of the demo was simply made up of enormous numbers of ordinary people, who came out knowing it was ?the big one? for the anti-cuts movement.

So, how radical was it and what does it mean for the wider situation? It is of course difficult to gauge the consciousness of such a huge demonstration, which will inevitably be varied. Many people carried placards saying they were against all cuts and joined in with our general strike chants. Nonetheless, Ed Miliband was able to say he was not against all cuts to services from the platform without suffering a significant number of heckles and interruptions. The TUC?s Brendan Barber even said it was ?middle Britain? that had turned out to oppose the cuts ? echoing the traditional neoliberal/bourgeois ideological line that sees
the middle classes as the decisive force in the political life of the nation. Although there was an element of
wishful thinking, the point was not entirely without substance, because, what Trotsky once derided as the
?petit bourgeois democrats? of the labour movement (not least the predominantly middle class activists of
the Labour Party itself), were certainly out in force. Even though there were large blocks of trade unionists,
aligned ordinary people from both the working and middle classes spontaneously joined the demo and
this was reflected in the uneven levels of radicalism.

The extent to which this mobilisation can now be harnessed to build an on-going and powerful resistance
to the cuts will determine its significance in the longer term. The government, of course, rejected any
slowing of the austerity programme. They hope to do as Blair did in 2003 and weather the storm of mass
protest through intransigence, thereby creating demoralisation amongst the mass movement.

Notwithstanding the fact that the anti-war movement continued to mobilise huge numbers even once war
had begun, there are at least two reasons for thinking that this movement could succeed in actually
bringing down the government.

There is first of all the actual form taken by the attack itself. This is not just a single decision to declare war,
nor even a single set of attacks such as the French pension reforms, but a general and strategic offensive
against the principle of state-run public service provision. From the wholesale privatisation of the NHS to
crippling public service cuts, the attacks are so wide-ranging and comprehensive that they (a) compel
workers to seek unity with other sections and raise into popular consciousness the need for a united
resistance, and (b) mean that sparks of resistance in a single sector could quickly inspire a wider and more
generalised resistance.

Secondly, this takes place within the context of coalition rule ? a peculiarity in the British context, though of
course normal in the rest of Europe. The weak link is certainly the Liberal Democrats, whose traditional
supporters in the progressive middle classes have become massively alienated. Many protested in the
student movement, and no doubt also on the huge demonstration last Saturday. With collapsing support in
the opinion polls (now down to less than 10 per cent), along with their liberal uneasiness at the vicious
character of many of the coalition?s policies, there is permanent pressure on them to break with their
coalition partners and rebuild their core support. This, however, would probably require a leadership
election inside the Liberal Democrat in which anti-Tory forces came forward (and this is very unlikely
without a further dramatic change in the current situation).

TUC Strategy

The TUC itself plainly sees the March for the Alternative as the high point of its campaign for the year. This
can be seen in the very limited horizons of its ?where next? statement, which barely outlined any concrete
action points beyond indicating support for the campaign of the unions (which has focused on lobbying and
letter writing) in defence of the NHS and calling on people to sign a series of other petitions. In short, there
was no statement about further street demonstrations or days of action, let alone a reference to organising
strikes. This is despite the 2010 TUC conference passing as policy the commitment to co-ordinating public
sector strikes against the government. Insofar as the TUC has convened meetings to discuss this, it has
done so to keep control of the more radical sections of the bureaucracy, while also increasing its degree of
bargaining power with the state and Labour Party opposition over policy. In the run up to the
demonstration, General Secretary Brendan Barber did include ?co-ordinated industrial action? as part of a
three pronged strategy along with marches and ?peaceful civil disobedience?. Limited as these words
certainly are, they do indicate how even the most conservative and right wing sections of the labour
movement are coming under pressure to lead a resistance campaign.

The TUC and right wing union leaders, like Paul Kenny and Dave Prentis, have adopted the strategy of
new realism?, as initially developed by the union leaders in the 1980s. This strategy states that the unions cannot defeat a Tory government and if they try they will only alienate the middle layers and classes, so entrenching the Tories electorally. The unions? role, according to this perspective, is to protest with tactics the middle layers and classes can accept, e.g. peaceful demos, lobbying Lib Dem MPs and working with the BMA. They want to work for a Labour government ? not by pressing their demands but by supporting that wing of the Labour leadership that can move the party to the centre and win ?middle England?. In this sense, Miliband has not been a disappointment at all, he is seen as their man: he?s a Kinnock.

We should denounce these union misleaders as out-and-out traitors, who should be kicked out of office, if not the trade union movement. Paul Kenny has endorsed workfare and privatisation of parts of the DWP; Dave Prentis has witch-hunted militants, collaborated with getting them sacked and closed down democratic branches, signing away members? rights behind their backs; Brendan Barber has collaborated with the police even after overwhelming evidence of their brutal repression of students.

The TUC lefts recognise that the right wing?s strategy is a vicious circle, which leads to Labour?s betrayal in government, as happened in 1997-2010, but they are timid, fearing isolation and having no real alternative strategy to the right wing?s political and economic strategy. This is why the NUT and PCS have spent so long getting co-ordinated strikes off the ground, playing ?I?ll go if you go? and trying to get right wing unions like the ATL on board. As a result, they trim their action to puny one-day strikes, months apart (the follow-up to 30 June is being held off until October when Unison and the NAHT ?might? join in).

The left union leaders could never lead a successful movement against the government. They fear the only alternative strategy ? of breaking the anti-union laws, mobilising their members to spread the strike and appealing over the heads of the right wing leaders to the rank and file of the big unions ? more than they fear a break with the right or losing control of their unions. This is why these union leaderships are also capable of and have been guilty of betrayals: the RMT?s calling off of action over job losses and victimisation on the tube; the PCS?s failure to lead national strike action while 100,000 jobs are culled; the FBU?s withdrawal from coordinated strike action in London in November 2010.

Unite is the key union in this situation. The largest union in Britain, the largest union in finance, hotel, catering and cleaning, and with enormous strength in industry and construction, it is significant enough to embarrass and push to the left the other unions in the public sector. Its industrial strategy will prove decisive in the fight against the cuts. Len McCluskey and the new NC have positioned the union inside the antcuts movement, against Labour?s programme of ?slower cuts? and in support of coordinated and generalised strike action.

However, its leading faction, the United Left, has also proved capable of selling out struggles (e.g. BA cabin crews) and witch-hunting its own left wing (the SWP) while welcoming in the right wing (Les Bayliss? supporters). This shows the perfidy of Stalinism within the trade unions. It also shows why we need a rank and file movement independent of all wings of the bureaucracy.

A rank and file movement could emerge in a number of ways ? the fact that independent rank and file initiatives have taken shape over the past months shows the potency of the slogan. However, the attempts by the centrists to set up quasi rank and file movements have not been successful: the NSSN suffered a crippling, probably fatal split when the SP tried to rail-road through its sectarian position on a new antcuts movement; Right To Work refuses to publish its own full position on the rank and file movement and the SWP will not allow rival socialists to join it. Democracy is the life-blood of a rank and file organisation. Centrism will only build a rank and file movement on this basis if forced to by workers taking the initiative themselves. In fact, the centrists have adopted the Stalinist method, for all their occasional clashes with the left bureaucracy.
On the other hand, there are very promising initiatives. Unite Grassroots Left has emerged from an internal struggle and two important election campaigns; it is the best opportunity to build a rank and file movement in Britain for a generation. Health Worker Network is a good example of a cross-union and no-union rank and file movement, which has utilised inter-union rivalry to its advantage and taken on some of the characteristics of workplace committees. Lambeth Activists, though currently inactive, showed that grassroots initiatives can also emerge out of branch struggles.

Our strategy for defeating the cuts, our position on the rank and file movement and our refusal to be hidebound by the comfortable routines of the trade unions will help us make the most of this promising situation and win workers to our ranks.

**Labour Party**

Contrast these words with the position of the Labour Party under Ed Miliband, who of course came into power last year largely thanks to the backing of trade union members, which enabled him to defeat his brother, Blairite David Miliband. Although Miliband did speak at the TUC rally and invoked the language of mass protest, he has been trenchant in his opposition to any forms of extra-parliamentary action designed to force a change in government policy, such as strikes and mass civil disobedience, openly counterposing this to voting for the Labour Party at the next elections. No matter then that should the working class take his advice, it will suffer a second historic defeat at the hands of the Tories. Whilst this electoral outlook is to be expected, it is still striking how little alternative policy Labour has articulated at all, including no promise to undo the damage of Tory cuts on their return to power. Miliband has refused, for example, to promise to repeal the £9,000 university fee hike.

In short, the Labour Party and its leadership poses against the cuts, but has failed to even put forward a coherent, mildly social democratic alternative policy. They are hoping instead to simply benefit from anger with the Tories when the election comes. But their lack of any alternative to the cuts except to vary the pace of them inevitably makes Labour look weak. As a result of this and as punishment for pushing through cuts where they control councils? Labour only scored 37 per cent against the Tories? 35 per cent in the local government elections. There is plainly a contradiction between the mass of workers who are feeling the force of these attacks and the passivity of the official leaderships in the face of them, the relationship between the masses and their leaders is dialectical? it works both ways. The picture therefore is remarkably uneven and fluid. Clearly tremendous potential exists for a deep and profound anti-capitalist radicalisation amongst the British working class. But this still remains at the level of ?the potential? rather than ?the actual?. There are signs in some of the big unions that things are moving to the left. Unite is affiliated to the Coalition of Resistance, and recently has formally dropped its ?Cuts too far, too fast? policy in favour of ?no cuts?. This means that rather than attempt to force its Labour Councilors to implement the cuts at a local level as it has done up to now, the union has pledged to defend those who refuse to do so. In theory this could be a massive impetus to the Labour Left, but in practice it is the Labour Right that is showing the more dynamic signs of revival in the form of Blue Labour. On the right wing of the trade union bureaucracy, the GMB has taken a sharp right turn in the form of General Secretary Paul Kenny?s support for workfare. In order to increase recruitment, Unite is tagging to the left and the GMB to the right. Blue Labour could act as a means for sections of the trade union bureaucracy to be dragged even further to the right, by allowing them to talk about workers? cooperatives and mutuals as an alternative to doing anything to fight the cuts. How this develops in the future is naturally a question of struggle.

**Labour Left**

Despite the increase of support for the Labour Party in the polls and their claim to have recruited some
30,000 members since the election, there are no signs of a revival of the Labour Left, who remain enormously isolated. National meetings of the Labour Representation Committee continue to attract the usual suspects and similarly still have only a handful of parliamentary advocates. The campaign does not have the means or really the will to mount a sustained campaign within the Labour Party to change its policies; this reflects the way that their radical left reformist outlook simply doesn’t strike a chord with the centre-left, mildly social democratic outlook of ordinary party members. The pressure on the Labour Party from the left, hence, continues to largely come from the unions / trade union members, and this is the principle contemporary focal point for the dialectic of contradiction between social base and party leadership which is, of course, fundamental to such bourgeois workers? parties. The significance of the LRC is therefore largely limited to the influence that it still retains on the left wing of the labour movement and the trade union bureaucracy.

The Radical left

McCluskey’s election, along with the strong showing for far left candidate Jerry Hicks in the same election, is significant in indicating support for a more radical perspective amongst the mass of workers in the unions. Generally speaking, far left forces remain relatively isolated and lack the influence to really mobilise the class on a significant scale against the cuts. This is hardly helped by the existence of several competing anti-cuts campaigns ? the NSSN anti-cuts initiative, Right to Work and the Coalition of Resistance. Of the far left groups, the SWP has put itself clearly to the left, correctly raising in their agitation the need for a general strike to bring down the government, yet they still inevitably collapse into opportunism whenever the opportunity for an alliance with the left wing of the bureaucracy presents itself (for example, they immediately abandoned the Hicks campaign following McCluskey’s election). Indeed it is this combination of their relative isolation along with losing the right wing of their leadership in the split with the Rees faction that largely explains their turn to the left. They are also organisationally and numerically much weaker today than they were, for example, in the first part of the last decade. The recent loss of central committee member Chris Bambery shows that the crisis, which we followed closely in the winter of 2009, did not conclude with the Counterfire split. With the possible exception of Counterfire, who claim to be growing (albeit recruiting on a very limited basis in terms of politics and activism), the rest of the far left remains ossified with no group showing signs of either significant advances or losses / a crisis. Concurrently, the student movement has also led to a resurgence in libertarian ideas, which go far beyond the old anarchist groups and have started to give rise to quite theoretically sophisticated but badly wrong approaches to leadership, organisation and social movements / class politics. We must continue to engage in pedagogically expressed but hard arguments.

National anti-cuts movement

The normal sectarian high-jinks continue to hinder the development of a united anti-cuts movement. Of the three campaigns associated with different far left groups (CoR-Counterfire, RTW-SWP, NSSN-SP), the Coalition of Resistance remains the one with the most potential because (a) it sensibly elected a large and relatively open steering committee, making it easier for local groups to influence its work, and (b) it has the most high profile and wide-ranging support, including the affiliation of the million-strong Unite union. But it has also been more moderate in relation to the union leaders, refusing for example to raise the general strike slogan for fear of putting them off, and is just as capable of bureaucratically sidelining forces to the left of it as the other initiatives. The most serious problem, however, is that the CoR has a conception of how it can win hegemony over the anti-cuts movement which focuses on making its ?brand? come to predominate in movement events and the media, and not as providing an organising centre for the burgeoning number of local anti-cuts groups.
Local anti-cuts groups ? key to the situation?

Despite its overall passive message, the TUC?s ?what next after the 26 March? statement did usefully link to a list of all of Britain?s local anti-cuts groups ? which now amount to some 179 local groups up from ?Aberdeen Against Austerity? to the ?Cornwall Anti-Cuts Alliance?. The spread of these groups really does reflect the development of a mass movement against austerity. They have been spurred into existence by huge local government spending cuts. These cuts are driven forward by the Con-Dem government slashing of central government grants to councils, but in the major inner city and metropolitan areas ? which are perniciously targeted for the worse cuts by the government ? it tends to be Labour Party councils who are asked to implement them. The local anti-cuts committees have campaigned for them to vote down cuts, propose deficit / needs budgets and build mass movements on the streets, rather than implement them. They have organised reasonably sized local demonstrations across the country, though none have yet had a truly ?mass character?. It will be interesting to see whether they can use the enormous TUC demo to draw in qualitatively greater numbers in the local communities.

The anti-cuts committees are a key part of our strategy because they are embryonic action committees, which could potentially provide the basis to deliver militant action on a sufficient scale ?with the union leaders where possible? and (in the more likely case) ?without them where necessary?. However, at present they are very uneven in their size and influence. Some are little more than a handful of activists, and even where they are backed by local trades councils the extent to which this actually translates into real workplace influence depends on the state of the local unions ? many of which remain moribund. In this sense there is an enormous amount of work to do. Some local anti-cuts groups are however much more promising ? with fairly large concentrations of activists meeting regularly, affiliations of specific local service campaigns doing local work in the communities, and with significant influence in local workplace organisation. Co-ordination of anti-cuts groups on regional and local level is thus key, not least because it can generalise best practice, build the confidence of activists, and turn the campaigns towards the difficult but necessary task of reigniting grassroots working class organisation up and down the country, in the context of the enormous attacks we face.

Industrial situation

It remains telling that there has been very little national strike action against austerity. The lecturers union has struck in higher and further education over pay, pensions and job security, but very similar attacks are faced by the whole public sector workforce, and other unions are still dragging their feet on delivering co-ordinated strike action ? now the end of June is spoken of as a possibility for this. Even when it comes to action short of strike action many unions are still incredibly passive. As such there remains a very serious disjuncture between all the talk of action coming out of union conferences, including even the TUC conference, and the official leaderships, and the delivery of tangible industrial action. A flash point of resistance is clearly local government, where we have seen strikes by teachers and council workers against job losses and service cuts in Tower Hamlet and Camden, and there are a number of other indicative and postal ballots underway too. Unfortunately, the dominant union in local government is Unison and they have not only been incredibly passive in leading any kind of resistance, but they have also witch-hunted grassroots activists trying to do exactly that. On the national stage pensions is where the big opportunity exists for a large, co-ordinated public sector strike, with the PCS, NUT and UCU all likely to strike on 30 June, and the possibility of others following. Although a one day strike won?t be sufficient to win, let alone bring down the government, it will put the question of industrial action and a general strike on the agenda more resolutely than before, as well as inspiring a more radical resistance from below that could potentially break the logjam. The major flashpoint at the political and industrial level is clearly the government?s health reforms. Here you have a vicious programme of privatisation and marketisation
which will destroy the very principle of publically funded healthcare, yet disgracefully it has been more conservative, establishment organisations like the BMA and Royal College of Nursing that have been leading the campaign against it, rather than Unison, the biggest union in the health sector. At the same time there are encouraging signs that grassroots activism from left wing doctors and nurses could quickly spiral into a national ?Save the NHS? movement in the coming months. The government is divided on the issue, with Lib Dem support falling away, plus support for the NHS as a publically funded service extends deep into the British electorate, even amongst Tory voters. This makes victory a very real possibility, as the coalition could suffer electoral meltdown if the (plainly accurate and true) perception grows that Tories ?can?t be trusted with the National Health Service?.

International situation

The transmission belt of the post-2007 recession to the class struggle has been the government assaults on the social and educational gains of workers and youth. In particular it strikes at those who work in the public sector where union density is higher. The eruption of anti-cuts struggles in Greece in Winter-Spring 2009, in France in October and Britain in November 2009, and the revolt in Wisconsin USA show that the bourgeoisie?s attempt to make the working class pay the cost of the crisis has not gone unanswered. In all these cases the combination of radicalised youth mobilisation and the involvement of rank and file union activists has been critical.

The outbreak of the democratic revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt in January/February ? especially the long occupation of Tahrir square ? has now had an impact on the other side of the Mediterranean, generating the Spanish square occupations in mid-May. Young people in a number of European countries have in turn copied these tactics, the most serious being in Athens. All these mobilisations show evidence of deep disillusionment, not only with the governments responsible for the cuts but also with a perceived lack of democracy within the parliamentary systems and their politically identikit parties. Alongside this must be set the record of elections in Spain and Portugal where, as in Britain, the right have ousted the cutting Socialists in favour of more cuts from the right wing parties. Moreover, it must be observed that there are signs of estrangement between these ?movements of the indignant? and the action or lack of it by the trade unions. In Spain and Greece there are even signs of hostility. The vague libertarian populist ideology of the Madrid square occupation and the on-off limited nature of the trade union opposition have made a coalescence of these struggles difficult. Yet Egypt and Tunisia showed how important such a coming together is if governments are to be brought down or their attacks halted. Whilst events in the Middle East have not had a major direct effect on the British class struggle it remains to be seen on 30 June what impact the plans for square occupations have - they have certainly entered the consciousness of young people as validating direct action to bring about fundamental change.

Economic situation

This has, as its long-term underpinning, a historic crisis into which capitalism entered in 2007-08. This is not simply a severe cyclical recession, which Britain and the USA are now painfully and slowly exiting but, according to the prognosis made by the League?s Eighth Congress, is an extended period where the fundamental tendency to stagnation of the main old concentrations of capital and ballooning fictitious capital, in North America, Western Europe and Japan, when combined with the staggering rise of Chinese capitalism, will repeatedly undermine the equilibrium of the system. This period is one marked by a combination of crises - not only the directly economic ones but social, ecological and geo-strategic ones too. Chinese and other BRIC countries? corporations, both state and private, are now powerful competitors for raw materials that hitherto western multinationals have monopolised. China in addition has pursued vigorous diplomacy, offering aid in development and a degree of political protection (up to and including its
UN Security Council veto) from the western pressure. Russia too offers such services, especially in the Middle East. The economic and political though not yet military friction is likely to increase and marks the opening up of a period in which the lean and hungry imperialisms and would be imperialisms will attempt to redivide the world’s markets and resources in their favour. This in turn makes the older and fatter imperialisms the USA, France and Britain particularly eager to shed the expensive overheads of social welfare conceded during the Post-1945 period of global hegemony.

The outbreak of democratic revolutions in the Middle East have not had a significant impact on the British class struggle, but they have provided an impetus to the arguments of the far left, creating a worked-example of revolutionary change, and thus a focal point and source of legitimacy for revolutionary socialist arguments. Packed meetings on and off the university campuses show the interest in following these historic events. For British imperialism the problems posed are similar to those that confront its French and American cousins. As one commentator in the Financial Times put it, it is indeed like 1989 and we are the Russians, as the old monarchies and authoritarian client regimes of these states come under sustained challenge by democratic movements. The West has been compelled to manoeuvre into a position of support for democratic demands, particularly since the fall of arch-western ally Mubarak in Egypt. Military intervention into Libya is designed to shore up this position, present the West as a friend of democratisation and reform, while maximise its influence over the regimes that emerge out of the current crisis. The sheer hypocrisy in its attitude, for example, to the Bahrain demonstrators massacred by Western allies, and that which it has shown to the Libyan regime, exposes how paper-thin the democratic positions of the West really are. In addition, a critical question going forward will be how this wave of democratisation will impact on the position of Israel and the peace process; the first indication will be whether a newly democratically elected Egyptian government will renegotiate its treaty with Israel.

Economic situation

Britain remains very sluggish, with growth in the first quarter of 2011 being 0.5 per cent after contracting in the last quarter of 2010 by some 0.6 per cent. The latest Office of National Statistics figures show that business investment declined 7.1 per cent in the same period, its biggest fall for two years; consumer confidence is very low and likely to be further hit by the big wave of public sector job losses that have started. The only possible bright spot is the recovery in manufacturing due to the weak pound and the booming recovery in important export markets such as China and Germany. Parts of the financial system, due to deleveraging, state bailouts and capital centralisation following the Lehman Brothers’ collapse, are also recording big profits again. But the future of the Eurozone and the sustainability of the Chinese boom add an enormous level of further uncertainty to this. A default by one of the PIIGS would have a huge impact on British banking system risking another contagion, as credit assets turn toxic. In the Eurozone the enormous unevenness between states with Germany and some Scandinavian countries booming, while others like Spain have real unemployment levels now at over 20 per cent is creating substantial political pressures between creditor nations reluctant to bail out the weak, and the debtors nations embittered by the terms of the Eurozone bailout fund. Should the fund not be able to meet a Spanish bail out, or if creditor and debtor states cannot agree on terms, then the future of the Eurozone would be in doubt. As this is Britain’s biggest export market along with the US, not to mention the interpenetration of its financial capital with these economies, such an outcome would have a massive impact on the economy here too. In the United States too, economic growth remains very sluggish while its deficit is running completely out of control, with some major bond players not taking positions anticipating that the level of borrowing is unsustainable, which will over time make credit more expensive for the US.

Revolutionary strategy to break the logjam
Our own arguments have tried to combine a militant strategy for the resistance, while taking care to utilise pedagogic forms of adaptation, which are sensitive to the work that still needs to be done to persuade the mass of workers of the need for a militant struggle to bring down the government. Our principle slogans have been the need for a general strike to stop the cuts and bring down the government, for action committees, and a rank and file movement in the unions, as well as putting demands on Labour to unlock the contradiction that exists between the party and its working class electorate and union-base, on which it is almost entirely dependent for funds. In the coming period we need to continually emphasise the need for mass civil disobedience, strikes and industrial action co-ordinated across the public sector, up to an all-out general strike to bring down the government.

A series of trade unions have now called on the TUC for a one-day general strike. The Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party have propagandised for one-day general strikes. However, it is unlikely in the extreme that that road to an effective i.e. an all out indefinite General Strike leads through a one-day action. The arguments that will be put up against this will be (a) it is still illegal under the anti-union laws so would lead to injunctions, fines, and (b) would still not compel the government to give in or get out, etc. The argument for an all out indefinite General Strike is that it can compel the government to give in or get out and it can defy and render impotent the anti-union laws.

The reason for raising the call for an all out indefinite general strike, both on the union leaders and as a culmination of a mass strike wave ?from below?, is that coordination of sectional strikes gives the union leaders a host of opportunities to call them off. A series of normal trade disputes over a variety of different job losses, pension reforms? already has to run the gauntlet of separate ballots, negotiations, etc. Even if they were to take place starting on the same day, their still distinct character provides a huge variety of opportunities for the leaders to do separate deals. The reason for ?left? union leaders arguing for this course of action is the anti-union laws which ban political strikes. It is almost certain that a court would issue an injunction against such a coordinated series of strikes. Then the unions would face the same problem ? humiliating surrender or defying the law and relying on the mass strength of millions of workers to checkmate the judges and force a climb-down as happened in 1972.

Source URL: https://fifthinternational.org/content/british-political-perspectives