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Britain

Massive demonstration in London against government austerity

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The largest political demonstration in Britain in a decade happened in London on March 26th. Estimate range from 250 000 to 400 000 people taking part in the March for the Alternative organised by the national union federation, the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Coming almost a full year after the election of a Conservative Liberal Democrat coalition which has been clear right from the start about its determination to cut public spending by Â£81bn you can't accuse the TUC of being hasty.

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/march263.jpg>

The cuts are class warfare. Â£7bn is being cut from welfare and social security spending. Local government is having its budget reduced by up to 9% in some areas and all the data show that the poorer an area is the more money it will lose. This translates into cuts in spending for the young, the elderly and the vulnerable. It also means tens of thousands of job losses in the heavily unionised public sector.

The demonstration itself proved that the unions are able to organise massive numbers of people in a way that no other social force can. Coaches and trains brought trade unionists, families and groups of friends from all over England, Scotland and Wales. It was demonstration with the organised labour movement at its heart. Missing perhaps were large numbers of the people who use the libraries, swimming pools and youth clubs which are being closed. It felt like the majority of those there were the public service providers.

The Coalition of Resistance, which has the support of unions like UNITE and the UCU, as well as the People's Charter and the Right to Work campaign, has been putting out the message that all cuts must be opposed as we are not responsible for the debt, and that mass action by trade unions, local anti-cuts groups and community organisations can force the government to retreat. The placards of the Coalition with the simple message of "no cuts" were to be seen everywhere on the demonstration.

Much of the subsequent press coverage concentrated on a small number of actions by handfuls of people. These fell into two categories. The first was an organised, marginal anarchist intervention which sought conflict with the police and attacked a few shops and banks. The second was evidence of a new radicalisation. UK Uncut specialises in peaceful propaganda stunts in the premises of firms like Vodafone which avoid paying their full tax bill. Their direct action tactics are gaining in popularity and have begun to inspire imitators.

The demonstration has presented the unions' bureaucratic leaderships with a problem. 165,000 jobs in local councils and 50,000 in the NHS are going under the axe. Many of these jobs will cease to exist just days after demonstration as tens of thousands are made redundant.

The national unions fear having their funds confiscated and the anti-union laws so much that they will organise no national action. At the moment there are only a few isolated ballots for strikes. We can't win with such a low level of strike action. You might "win the argument", but that does not stop the Tories' plans.

The bureaucratic leaderships are willing to sacrifice tens of thousands of their members' jobs rather than put up a real fight. The link between the unions and the Labour Party is now the most effective means of controlling working class militancy in workplaces even though the evidence from recent elections is showing that working class people are voting Labour as a protective reflex. However the leadership of both the Labour Party and many unions hold the view that industrial action to protect jobs and services will be electorally damaging. Not just that. If workers acquire a habit of fighting for their own interests against the Con Dems they will probably be willing to do it against Labour councils and a future Labour government which will have its own programme of cuts.

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The Con Dems will be demanding even more job losses, pay cuts, destruction and privatisation of public services in the very near future. The inertia of the TUC meant that our class entered the ring and was hammered all through round one. We have to learn from this experience. The demonstration was a display of the strength of organised workers and the fact that millions of other people are looking for them to take action which is at least as bold and decisive as that of the Con Dems.

There are some things those that want to defeat the government should insist the TUC do:

It must mobilise support for every group of workers who take any sort of action to defend jobs, salaries, pensions or working conditions. It has to do this with at least the same determination that the Con Dems are bringing to the fight. This means that it does basic things like organising speaking tours and encouraging branches to make solidarity donations when industrial action takes place.

It has to explain to union branches the importance of making links with communities and service users who are being hit by the cuts. This is something it has abjectly failed to do but is something any leadership worth its salt should be pushing hard.

The TUC decision of their September Congress that there should be “nationally co-ordinated action” against the cuts must be implemented without delay.

It has to launch a major campaign in defence of pension provision in the public sector and for an uplift in private sector pension provision. This is something that will affect every working person in the country and could put the TUC at the forefront of the fight against what the ruling class is trying to do. On this issue it is still skulking in the changing room.

None of these are particularly radical things to ask for. They are an absolute bottom line around which the largest possible unity can be built and which just might see the working class movement start round two of the fight looking like it has remembered what it is supposed to do when the bell rings. If the movement loses on the cuts in local government now, then it will set in demoralisation and despair making defeat over the governments other attacks – such as their plans to destroy the National Health service and the major attacks on pensions - even more likely.

Billy Curtis, a supporter of Socialist Resistance, wrote this report for *La Gauche*, the newspaper of the Revolutionary Communist League in Belgium.