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Britain

The politics of class hatred as a response to the economic crisis

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Britain has the first coalition government seen in Britain for 75 years. It was formed in June after an inconclusive election by an agreement between the Tory Party (main party of British capitalism) and the Liberal Democrats (the junior party of capitalism) who in their previous form as the Liberal Party have not been in government since the early part of the 20th century.

The Liberal Democrats moved sharply to the right immediately after it became clear that a coalition was in the offing. They rejected a coalition with the Labour Party and formed a coalition with David Cameron's Tories – which they hope will last for a five-year term.

This government, however, is a coalition in name only. David Cameron is the most ideologically driven Tory leader of modern times. It is more consistently ideologically neoliberal than Margaret Thatcher, in fact. What Britain actually has is a right-wing Thatcherite, small state, slash and burn, Tory Government, propped up by the Liberal Democrats who have collapsed into their politics.

It is a government defined entirely by its cuts agenda and by its approach to the crisis and Britain's debt. It is a government of millionaires who are delivering an attack on the poor the like of which Margaret Thatcher must have dreamed of but was never remotely able to achieve.

They have launched the biggest package of cuts in Britain in living memory – £81 billion of cuts, the sacking of at least 500,000 public sector workers, with an additional 500,000 job losses in the private sector as a consequence, plus massive attacks on health, education, pensions, transport, housing, welfare, local government, the arts, and the environment. It goes alongside massive deregulation and privatisation of services. Their project is to put an end to the age of welfare which opened up with the Beveridge reports on social insurance and full employment as the Second World War came to an end. The National Health Service established in the 1940s is to be broken up and privatised.

It will be the urban poor, particularly in the inner city areas, who will be the hardest hit particularly by the decisions to slash local council spending by 25%. The cut in housing benefit and the introduction of means tested tenancies in social housing will drive hundreds of thousands of poorer families out of the richer boroughs in a huge exercise in social cleansing. The cuts to local council budgets will also rapidly impact on the NHS as hospitals are unable to discharge patients because of the lack of care in the community and hospital beds are blocked.

Yet neither the Tories nor the Liberal Democrats had any kind of mandate for this onslaught in the election. David Cameron cynically cultivated his socially concerned image and talked about how much he loved the National Health Service at the same time as he was planning to destroy it.

The true class nature of this coalition was exposed when this reactionary package was announced in Parliament – including the loss of 500,000 jobs. It was greeted by Tory and Liberal Democrat MPs with prolonged cheering and stamping of feet and waving of order papers. This reaction exposed the most disingenuous mantra in the coalition vocabulary - that they are forced to do this by the debt and that they have to make 'hard choices' in order to save the economy.

This is complete nonsense. They love every minute of it. The decisions they are taking are precisely the ones they have wanted to take for a long time and are now using the crisis as a battering ram to force them through. And they

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have absolutely no intention of reversing any of this whatever happens to the economy. Some of the Tories have said openly that the crisis must not be allowed to turn into a missed opportunity.

The Tories have planned for this for years before getting into office and the language they use is becoming increasingly savage. They have reinvented concepts such as the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor dredged up from Victorian England. The media has been fed with endless stories of 'benefit scroungers' sponging off 'hard working taxpayers' and 'housing cheats' living in luxury accommodation with huge families at the expense of the rest of society.

Incapacity benefit claimants are portrayed as 'work-shy scroungers' who have no intention of finding a job. Public sector workers are demonised as useless bureaucrats sitting in overstaffed workplaces waiting to draw their 'gold plated' pensions. They are 'waste' to be 'cut out' as soon as possible. This is the language of naked class hatred.

Alongside all this reactionary spin has gone the ridiculous mantra that the debt must be repaid and the 'there is no alternative'. It is the economics of the madhouse and is likely to push the economy further down probably to a double dip recession and throw even more out of work.

Remarkably the coalition has launched this massive attack and still have majority support in the population for the proposition that 'there is no alternative' to the cuts and that the coalition 'has got it about right'. This may well now start to change of course but to get to this stage with majority support is a remarkable achievement. It means that they have decisively won the ideological argument over the past 5 months.

The tactics of the coalition seems to what some activists are calling 'shock and awe'. An echo from the invasion of Iraq. It involves launching a tidal wave of attacks and initiatives day after day backed up by massive propaganda - which is designed to make people feel that resistance is pointless.

And unfortunately against the relentless onslaught of the coalition there are no alternative authoritative voices.

The media collapsed wholesale into the politics of the coalition from the day after the election. They now present 'there is no alternative' as it is was an indisputable truth. The media has shifted to the right and lost its critical faculties since the coalition came to office.

The new Ed Milliband leadership of the Labour Party has already completely failed. They not only left the field open to the coalition to do their worst but they allowed themselves to be trapped into the Brown/Darling formula of halving the debit over 4 years - which itself implied massive cuts even if they were a bit less than the coalition.

Most damaging of all is that there is nothing from the leaders of the major unions or from the TUC. They discussed the cuts last September and decided to call a demonstration NEXT MARCH! Meanwhile most of them have nothing to say about the cuts and have organised nothing against them.

Some of the smaller unions have more militant leaderships but the larger unions even at rank and file level are very weak. In most industries massive attacks have already taken place without resistance. Wages have been cuts jobs have been lost and pension rights have been attacked. Under these very weak conditions action against the cuts does not come easy.

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This is why the student demonstrations we have seen in recent weeks have been so magnificent. Of course the attack on university education is extreme. Tuition fees are being increased from £3,000 a year to £9,000. At the same time there is a huge cut in funding for the universities - so the debit is being transferred into the pockets of the students. Arts and humanities courses are suffering 100% cut if their budgets.

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Despite this extreme provocation by the coalition the response from the students in terms of mass demonstrations, occupations and protests exceeded all expectations. The occupation of the Tory Party offices have had world-wide publicity as have the demonstrations. What is not so widely understood is how quickly this movement has radicalised and its impact on the coalition government – who fear with some justification that this is a sign of things to come rather than a once-off protest.

Also new is the widespread participation of school students in the demonstration. In some cases whole schools participated, not least because the cuts will not effects students who are currently at university but the new students as they leave school.

Exactly how this movement will help to generate a wider movement against the cuts and/or effect the situation in the trade unions is not yet clear – but it is certain to have an impact.

This was clear on Saturday November 27th in the first major conference to organise against the cuts called by the Coalition of Resistance – a broad body which seeks to generate a the widest possible campaign against the cuts. The conference attracted 1300 activists and both students and school students were amongst the most active and inspiring participants.

Until now the anti-cuts movement in Britain has been divided. There have been three campaigns: one organised by the SWP, another by the SP (Militant) and the Coalitions of Resistance which is far broader and pluralistic. Hopefully the success of this conference can promote a positive unity which would be a breakthrough for the whole movement.