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Britain

Trade unions take on crisis-ridden government

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On November 30 up to three million workers in Britain will be taking strike action in defence of pension rights under brutal assault by the Tory-led Coalition government, following overwhelming yes votes in ballots by thirty unions.

Public opinion is strongly in support of the strikes despite desperate attempts by the government to isolate those taking action. The coalition, consisting of the Conservative Party (popularly referred to as Tories) together with the Liberal Democrats as junior partners has unsuccessfully tried to pit workers in the private sector against those in the public sector but to little avail. A poll for the BBC published on November 29 showed 61 per cent in support of the strike.

This strike is now by far the most significant initiative in the fight against cuts, privatisations and austerity drive. It is a remarkable development in a situation where the trade unions in Britain have been almost dormant for a very long time – since Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's defeat of the Miner's Strike in 1984.

It is the product of several key developments taken over the past year which have pushed the movement forward. The first was the student revolt a year ago which electrified the struggle and exposed the lethargy of the trade union movement, which, despite conference speeches had still to take any form of action.

Then in March half a million turned out for the TUC London demonstration, making it far bigger and more militant than the organisers had anticipated. Around the same time UK Uncut emerged as an important and innovative direct action group.

This was followed in June by the highly successful strike by the teaching and civil service unions. This brought large numbers of young teachers and civil servants into strike action and onto the streets for the first time making it a game changer for the unions. The strike was a tribute to those in the teaching and civil service unions – not least Mark Serwotka of the Civil Servant's PCS and left-wingers on the Executive of the National Union of Teachers union who fought long and hard to deliver the action and make it a big success.

The November 30 strike is a big step forward over previous actions. Most of the teaching and civil service unions already had live ballot results which allowed them to take action on November 30 without reballoting. These include: the PCS, the NUT, the University and College Union (UCU), the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, the Welsh teachers union the UCAC.

The vote by UNISON, Britain's biggest union which organises across the public and voluntary sectors, with 245,358 in favour and 70,253 against, put the strike on course to be the most important such action for a generation. It is now by far the most significant initiative in the fight against the coalition cuts.

Following the UNISON result a whole swathe of other unions have followed suit from the EIS, the Scottish teachers union, Unite and the GMB (both of which are general unions but with significant memberships in the public as well as the private sectors), the NASUWT teaching union, the NAHT head teachers' union, the FDA civil service union, Prospect, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, and NIPSA the Northern Ireland civil service union. All have delivered resounding yes votes with turn outs higher than in parliamentary elections. In all thirty unions will be taking strike action on November 30. Such united action has not been seen in Britain for a very long time.

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The strikes are not just in defence of pensions – important as that issue is. They are widely seen as strikes against the whole of the coalition's cuts and austerity agenda. They seem to have been organised in this way to avoid the draconian anti-union laws – the most repressive in Europe – which outlaw solidarity action.

But Len McCluskey, the General Secretary of UNITE (Britain's second biggest union) said that the strike "may be about protecting the pensions of our members against the Osborne onslaught, but just as importantly it is about standing up for an alternative policy, an alternative society."

He continued, "In the 1970s such crises were blamed wrongly on overpowerful trade unions. Today no-one can deny that it is unregulated, untamed capitalism to blame."

The decision of the Government to offer some marginal concessions – a slightly better accrual rate and some protection for workers close to retirement – just as the first ballot results were coming in was an attempt to split the strike. The unions, to their credit, rejected them and decided that the strike would go ahead.

This was a sign of weakness on the government's part. It was not a part of their plan, which was to face the unions down hard line and enforce their full terms. The offer was a clear sign that the coalition is losing confidence in its ability to see the struggle through.

The reasons for this are not difficult to see. They are shocked that they are facing a strike of three million workers at this stage and they are faced with the spectacular failure of their economic perspective, which, by whatever measure used, is falling apart in front of their eyes. They are facing the slide towards a double-dip recession with no chance of reversing it in time for the next election – which was the plan behind the coalition agreement. If they did not face a weak and compromised opposition, and did not have the media wholeheartedly on their side in the debate over the debt and the cuts, they would have been lucky to survive until now.

The coalition's problems are compounded by the economic and political tsunami taking place in the Euro Zone, which threatens to overshadow and derail anything the coalition might do in Britain. This is exemplified by the catastrophe facing Greece, the contagion overtaking Italy, the imminent break-up of the Euro Zone, and the paralysis of the G20.

The crisis in the European Union has also triggered a remarkable revolt of Tory Eurosceptics, who are taking the chance to vent their nationalistic and xenophobic spleen. In fact Cameron is facing a bigger and more vociferous revolt than that faced by John Major in the 1990s – the ones he called "the bastards".

All this underlines the extent to which Cameron has swung the Tory party back to Thatcherism and the rabid rightwing nature of recent Tory MP intakes. It is also politically divisive within the coalition with the hapless ultra-pro-EU Lib Dems caught in the middle of this mayhem disingenuously defending a coalition which continues to use them as convenient shields for Tory policies.

The lesson from all this for the trade unions and the anti-cuts movement is clear. This is exactly the time to pile on the pressure and build the fight back to its full potential. It is the time not only to maximise opposition to the cuts but is a real opportunity to put the trade unions back centre stage where they have not been for a very long time.

The unions have been organising to make the strike as solid and effective as possible and building their organisation on the ground. The education unions were boosted by the strike in June. This strike is starting to do the same right across the public sector with unions like UNISON being inundated with new applications to join.

The whole of the labour movement and the anti-cuts movement will be backing the strike in any and every way

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possible. Trade union demonstrations, student demonstrations, occupations, and protests will take place in at least 1000 towns and cities right across the country.

An important new factor in this is the inspirational Occupy Movement with its highly successful tented presence at St Pauls in London and in other parts of the country. It brings to the struggle the spirit of Tahrir Square, the powerful example of the Arab Spring, and the image of mass popular movements bringing down brutal dictatorships which had been there for years – practical demonstrations of how such power can be successfully challenged.

But a big success on November 30, however, is still only a stage in the struggle, if a very important one. It is crucial that the dynamic and momentum of the strike is continued and the pressure maintained. This means not only consolidating the gains of this action but preparing for the next – as a number of trade union leaders have already made clear. This is the best opportunity yet to strike a serious blow against this government and it is vital that the movement takes full advantage of it.

This is an updated version of the editorial in the current edition of *Socialist Resistance*.