

Britain's trade unions will probably not spearhead a new winter of discontent, yet – their public standing remains too fragile

This week's Trades Union Congress has seen some radical rhetoric of opposition to the public spending cutbacks. Yet [Bart Cammaerts](#) is struck by the general tone of media hostility to unions in Britain, and the legal constraints that militate against European-style cross-union campaigns



Since the end of August the Tory-Liberal Democrat coalition's approval rate on YouGov has been coloured red, for the first time since the new government started. Of course opinion polls tell us only part of a complex story, but this certainly is an indication that things are not going that smoothly in coalition land as more and more people begin to feel and see the draconian measures taken by the government. In the months to come the real impact of these measures will be felt across the country, in services being discontinued at various levels, and contracts being halted, causing rising unemployment in public sector as well as in the private sector – certainly amongst the many firms that have become highly dependent on investments by local, regional and national governments.

In this regard, two headlines caught the eye this week:

- the bonus culture in finance is back at the same level as before the banking crisis, at least for companies included on the FTSE; and
- the labour unions (finally) called for militant resistance and civic disobedience against the cuts.

While there is a lot of populist rhetoric around concerning high-earners and the bonus culture, many in the unions argue that the financial bail-out of capitalism by governments and taxpayers is now being abused by the coalition to cut much deeper than they should. This point has something going for it. From their perspective, the capitalist structures, and certainly the financial system, are starting to generate huge profits again on the back of massive cuts in almost all areas of everyday life of citizens and workers, redundancies, and increased gaps between rich and poor.

It will be interesting to see in the months to come whether the unions will manage to get their act together, mobilise their various constituencies and galvanise their own coalitions between different sectors and types of workers. One of the structural issues the unions have to deal with in the UK to organise themselves properly are the legal constraints aiming to make co-ordination of industrial action difficult – to prevent a national strike for example. The political 'opportunity structure' for unions is not as favourable here as in other democratic countries across the EU.

Furthermore, many commentators have been struck over the years by how little space trade union leaders get in the public domain and how anti-union the media generally are in the UK compared to other European democracies. This is not unsurprising given the Thatcherite onslaught on unions, their core-values and the role they should play in a pluralist society. The Glasgow Media Group documented in detail the consistent negative bias of the UK media vis-à-vis the labour unions in the 1970s and 1980s.

Part of the problem is that the unions are mostly only given a voice in times of heightened conflict, usually localised to a particular industry or organization – a context which avoids any media discussion of the macro-issues and rather 'naturally' focuses on the disruptions being caused. In addition, generally speaking trade union leaders are included often as part of the public debate in the media – when, for example, a budget is being discussed or wider societal issues, such as racism, housing, education.

Besides this and above all, an effective union-lead campaign against drastic public spending cuts would need to generate a willingness amongst both white collar and blue collar workers, in the private as well as the public sector, to engage in direct action and protest. This is surely the biggest challenge of those dreaming of a new winter of discontent. Higher unemployment might suggest more potential activism, in part because there are more people with time on their hands to organise, to mobilise and protest. But it also means that those who are still in employment might be reluctant to participate in industrial actions with political aims

potentially putting their job at risk. And the unemployed, of course, are not well integrated into trade unions. Given the way that most of the media laid into the unions during the coverage of the TUC conference, it is also quite certain that all actions that the unions take to protest against the government's policies will be met with a concerted counter-campaign geared towards delegitimising their actions.

Coming myself 'from the continent' where labour unions are an integral part of democracy and a mobilising force with sufficient public support, it remains strange to observe the almost visceral anti-union sentiments in the UK even while unions often represent more people than all the members of all political parties taken together, let alone the shareholders of media companies. But then again revolution, class warfare and militancy never did fare very well on this island.

A few months ago, the BBC ran a report on a massive demonstration in Paris against raising the legal pension age of 60 by a further two years. The British journalist asked a middle-aged French woman why she was demonstrating against a modest rise in the pension age to 62 when in Britain the pension age is already 65, with further rises on the horizon. The French woman shrugged her shoulders, then smiled and simply replied: 'Poor Brits'.

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