



[Martin Cavanagh](#)

21 September 2024

Starmer aims to preserve the status quo - prepare for battles ahead

If there was any thought that the challenges our movement faced under fourteen years of Tory rule would disappear under Starmer's Labour government, last week exposed the reality, writes PCS President Martin Cavanagh

As we headed to Brighton for the annual TUC Congress, many observers were speaking of a "mixed bag" so far from the new administration.

Their promise to repeal the anti-union laws of 2016, remove the Minimum Service Levels legislation, and to bury the Rwanda Deportation Plan, of course are to be welcomed. And following on from their election manifesto pledge to introduce the greatest package of improvements to workers' rights since the 1970's, you can see why it is tempting for some to declare the dawning of a new age of industrial relations.

This impression was further enhanced with the Chancellor's early announcements about public sector pay and her willingness to "settle industrial disputes" to kick start the economy.

Many of us, however, were not fooled and were right to be cautious. If anyone had followed Starmer's political career and seen the witch-hunt of socialists within the party under his leadership, it was obvious what to expect from him in leading government; decision after decision aimed at preserving the status quo, protecting big business and the political elite, and doubling down on those he sees as a threat.

This new administration has not only refused to lift the reviled Two Child Benefit Cap, which overnight would help over half a million vulnerable children, but the Prime Minister had also set about making an example of those “rebels” who dared vote against the whip.

This, allied with Labour’s abhorrent refusal to demand a complete ban on arms sales to Israel, were to be expected.

However, despite these obvious warning signs, many Trade Union delegates headed to Brighton last week with a sense of hope and optimism. While it is true that the PM delivered a positive narrative on the New Deal for Workers and repealing the 2016 anti-trade union laws, in the space of just a few days, we also saw the harsh reality we face as a movement.

The breaking news going into the week was the scandalous decision made to remove the Winter Fuel Payments for all pensioners not in receipt of Pension Credit, and the attempt to brush it off as just one of a number of “tough decisions” the government would have to make.

The PM then delivered the most uninspiring of addresses to Congress itself. The first Premier in 14 years to address TUC Congress should have been a big deal. It should have seen a rousing ovation from delegates, similar to that given to Jeremy Corbyn in 2017, instead nearly half the delegates remained seated and there was no tangible buzz of anticipation.

In addressing a fringe last Tuesday evening, I said I had been “underwhelmed”, to be kind. Just a week on, I find myself prepared for the battles ahead our movement will inevitably face.

While the word austerity was not used by the PM, the warnings he gave, “tough decisions”, future pay awards being “shaped” by those decisions, and the threat of things getting “worse before they get better”, are a precursor to austerity. They also tell us that once again a Labour government will squander the opportunity they have been given to deliver genuine change for the working class of this country.

Economic growth, the new Government’s stated number one priority, cannot be achieved by suppressing workers wages and impoverishing millions of pensioners and benefit claimants.

If this wasn’t depressing enough, we have seen all too vividly in recent months what can happen when our communities lose faith, and hope of a better society.

As the economy stagnates, and further cuts are made to services to our most vulnerable, the far-right will gladly seek to fill the void, not just on the streets but politically, through Reform; the Party of the far-right who has found its way into the House of Commons.

This summer has seen racists, Islamophobes, and fascists emboldened more than at any time in years. Our movement has responded yet again, it has to be said with varying degrees of success, to try and quell the politics of hate. The reality, however, is that with the gloomy forecast given by the PM, far-right rhetoric will again be spread amongst the poorest in our communities and our job of educating the disenfranchised remains as urgent as ever.

The immediate task has to be one of mass mobilisation. Both at the Reform Party Conference in Birmingham later this week, and on 26 October, to counter the Tommy Robinson led demonstration in London.

My union, PCS, has a proud record of not only campaigning for and defending our members interests, but also for looking outwards and standing up for the most vulnerable.

It is why we campaign for a fairer social security system and tax justice, while at the same time being prepared to challenge the government of the day on issues such as immigration and asylum. I am immensely proud of the role our union played alongside others in defeating both the Channel Push Back Policy and the Rwanda Deportation Plan, and the formulation of our Safe Passage Policy which we will continue to pursue politically.

Equally, I and other PCS activists, have been honoured to stand on platforms in front of hundreds of thousands of people, demanding an end to the genocide and an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Palestine. We have called for an end to all arms sales to Israel, and for the illegal occupation of Palestine to cease. Our voices will continue to be heard loudly as we seek an end to the killing of innocent children, women, and men, and our members will not be silenced.

We in the movement had every right to hope for better following the demise of the Tories' 14-year assault on our class. But the struggle remains.

Now is the time for us to keep on the front foot, and demand of a Labour Government the decent pay, jobs, rights, and public services we deserve. If unions and other activists co-ordinate our campaigns, we can show this Government that we will hold them to account every bit as much as we did the Conservatives.

Workers, the unemployed, the sick and disabled, our pensioners and children, asylum seekers, and the oppressed across the globe, also have every right to expect better from a Labour Government than we had from the Tories. It is still our role to fight for that, and I know we can build the biggest coalition yet and rise to the challenge.

[This article first appeared on the Labour Outlook website.](#)