Union leaders call for effective opposition to cuts and austerity

For the third consecutive year The Haldane Society and the Institute of Employment Rights staged a discussion with figures of the labour movement, chaired once again by Haldane vice president and IER chair, John Hendy QC, on 15th May 2012. This year John was joined in conversation with Christine Blower of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and Mark Serwotka of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS). The three speakers conducted a state-of-nation type analysis of the challenges facing trade unions as the effects of first of the Government’s doctrinaire cuts (around 80 per cent of cuts are still to come) begin to emerge.

Christine Blower saw the Government’s plans for education as a natural extension of those initiated by Labour. The types of measures we are witnessing the Coalition imposing on schools: fragmentation of schools; threatening localised pay; and the loss of centralised roles such as educational psychologists were all driven by the belief in the power of the market. Blower believed it was now the challenge for unions to become more central to community and family life. One reform she wished of the Labour party was that it would reintroduce Clause IV. A forlorn hope perhaps.

Mark Serwotka also conceded that the scale of austerity meant unions would have to adapt. To be relevant to the community, trade unionism would have to not only continue to oppose low pay and job losses but represent wider concerns in people’s lives. Serwotka rejected the suggestion that all political parties were the same but said that while each remained part of the neo-liberal consensus then no effective opposition would exist in the country. It is that absence of a true opposition that Serwotka says the unions must address and occupy.

Serwotka believes that the tactics needed to face down austerity should be dictated by the confrontation with which one is presented. The PCS will shortly ballot its membership on whether it should in certain circumstances stand candidates in political elections. He is fortified by the notion that if some independent candidates were to stand on platforms such as opposing privatisation of public services or welfare support cuts it could resonate with sections of the public.

‘Debate is healthy’ and something he welcomes, Serwotka told the audience. With signs that the people of Greece and France are rejecting Government-enforced austerity there may be cause to believe that the argument that there is an alternative may yet win out.

Russell Fraser

May

25: Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff partially vetoes a controversial land law which came to be known as the Forest Code that would have hampered her Government’s attempts to protect the Amazon rainforest. Environmental groups such as Greenpeace had urged President Rousseff to completely veto the bill.

28: The Special Immigration Appeals Commission denies bail to the Jordanian cleric Abu Qatada. The court said that releasing him on bail during the Olympic games would place an unmanageable burden on the police and security services.

28: At the Leveson Inquiry, Tony Blair’s evidence is interrupted when protester David Lawley-Wakelin bursts in shouting: ‘This man should be arrested for war crimes.’

30: Julian Assange loses his Supreme Court appeal against his extradition to Sweden. However, the court granted his lawyers 14 days in which to submit further arguments after his QC, Dinah Rose, expressed concern that some of the judges had decided the case with reference to the Vienna Convention on a point not argued before the court. The court decided not to reopen the appeal.