

Tony Blair's friends mount savage union-busting campaign in Britain

by Mark Burdman

Whatever remaining delusions might have been held, that the May 1 landslide election of Tony Blair as British prime minister was ushering in a bright, post-Thatcherite era of progressive policies in the United Kingdom, were rudely shattered during the week of July 7. Not only has Blair's government willfully blown up the situation in Northern Ireland, and caused some of the worst havoc there in recent years, but Blair and his entourage have provoked a three-day strike by British Airways cabin crews, by unleashing a barrage of union-busting actions that are equal to, or worse than, what was seen in the era of Margaret Thatcher's days in office.

Quickly, the Blair government is revealing itself to be committed to austerity and wage-gouging. Blair likes to promote himself as the embodiment of a "New Britain," a spokesman for "the population of the United Kingdom," ending the divisiveness and polarization of the Thatcher years. In reality, he is revealing himself to be exactly what we forecast he would be, the instrument of the secretive Queen's Privy Council—of which he is a member—and of the leading financial and banking houses of the City of London.

'Virtual reality in a virtual airline'

Cabin crews belonging to the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) have been forced out on strike by the draconian cost-cutting policies of the British Airways management, under the direction of British Airways chief executive Bob Ayling, a backer of Blair. To conform to the era of "globalization," Ayling has resolved on a massive £1 billion cut for British Airways, between now and the year 2000.

In the days leading up to the strike, he and his henchmen carried out a campaign of intimidation against TGWU members, threatening reprisals against workers who participate in the strike action, and negotiating with the TGWU in a brutal confrontationist manner. At the same time, British Airways has been cultivating a strike-breaking company union, called Cabin Crew '89 (CC '89), with which it reached a separate contract agreement in the days before the breakdown of negotiations with the TGWU. TGWU national aviation secretary George Ryde characterized British Airways' mode of behavior as "virtual reality in a virtual airline."

After the first day of the strike, which had succeeded in grounding almost 70% of British Airways flights out of London's Heathrow Airport and the majority of services at Gatwick covered by the dispute, the British Airways management launched what the London *Guardian*, in its lead article on July 10, characterized as "a sharp escalation of the dispute." It announced that it would be *suing* the TGWU, for hundreds of thousands of pounds in damages. British Airways Communications Director Kevin Murphy said the company would invoke alleged "procedural flaws" in the TGWU strike ballot, "to recover from the union, some of the losses we have incurred."

British Airways is invoking union-breaking legislation developed during the Thatcher-John Major years, in its suit.

'The world's most ruthless airline'

David Cockroft, the general secretary of the International Transport Federation (ITF), the umbrella organization for transport unions internationally, released a statement on July 7, on "The World's Most Ruthless Airline," in which he charged: "British Airways is now engaged in the most massive, highly organized and well-funded union-busting operation ever seen in the airline industry. If the company succeeds, it will send a signal to every other airline in the world, and one which none of those airlines will be able to ignore."

Cockroft blasted British Airways' "absolute refusal to negotiate. . . . It will only impose. The company has engaged in shocking tactics of intimidation of union members. . . . The company has recruited an army of strike-breakers." He reported that the ITF is "requesting all its civil aviation affiliates, at every airport in the world where British Airways flies, to take all possible steps to ensure that no British Airways flight is handled during the strike period, and to ensure that the company knows that if the world's most ruthless airlines comes to your airport, the message is, 'No way BA.' "

Indeed, the strike is rapidly spreading in various ways. Britain's Trades Union Confederation (TUC), which groups together the country's main unions, is organizing a consumer boycott of British Airways. Throughout continental Europe, aviation unions are involved in solidarity actions with the TGWU. And, in the United States, the International Associa-

tion of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) is organizing sympathy actions, in New York, for the strikers.

BA's Ayling: A Blair man

This is the worst labor dispute in Britain in a generation, since the famous miners' strikes of the 1970s. And, it is now happening with a Labour government in power. So, what is Tony Blair doing? Letting British Airways dig in the knife.

On July 7, Blair's 10 Downing Street declared that the issues involved in the BA-TGWU fight must be "sorted out by those involved." The July 10 *Guardian* reported that, in reaction to the strike's beginning, and to British Airways upping the ante, "the government maintained its hands-off line," despite extensive behind-the-scenes pressure from Labour parliamentarians, for something to be done. Blair responded to questions from the opposition Conservative Party leadership, by saying that he would not be getting involved personally.

This is a departure from the practice of previous British Labour governments, which would step forward to mediate between large unions and employers. The British press is stressing that, by so acting, or not acting, Blair is following in the union-busting tradition of his predecessor, Margaret Thatcher.

But the reality is more worse than that. British Airways chief executive Ayling, formerly known as a Thatcher devotee, has, in the recent period, been one of a number of British finance, banking, insurance, and business bigshots to line up with Blair.

The July 9 London *Times* reported that "Bob Ayling, a former government lawyer, is close to some key figures in the Labour leadership. He shared a 50th birthday party with Jack Straw, the Home Secretary and a longtime friend and neighbor. Tony Blair unsuccessfully tried to get him to head his No. 10 Downing unit, a job that the prime minister would like to fill with a senior business figure. Mr. Ayling is heading the government's Greenwich Dome Millennium project, alongside Peter Mandelson, Mr. Blair's closest ministerial adviser."

The *Times* commented that the TGWU leadership believes that "such close new Labour relationships mean that BA has all but complete government sanction in the dispute."

BP and Prudential for Blair

What is happening with the British Airways strike is typical of the Blair government approach. On July 2, the annual "Budget Speech" of Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown was heralded by the City of London as a great triumph for the financial houses and "markets," because it prioritized tax breaks for the wealthy, and mostly hurt the poor and underprivileged. Brown put forward the government's "Welfare to Work" program, the which has been architected by leading Blair team members, in cooperation with such Thatcherite

outfits as London's Adam Smith Institute. The ASI is one of the leading British associations of the Mont Pelerin Society, the "radical free market" cult organization created by Friedrich von Hayek.

Ayling is one of a number of "business" influentials who have been brought in to "manage" Blair's economic policies. Another is David (now Lord) Simon, former chairman of British Petroleum, who is a senior official in both the British Treasury and in the Ministry of Trade and Industry. Another is Sir Peter Davis, chief executive of Prudential, the insurance giant. According to the June 27 *Private Eye*, Sir Peter is "the obvious man" to help implement the Blair government's "Welfare to Work" program, because "so much of his life has been spent propelling people in the opposite direction," i.e., throwing employees out of work, in companies that he oversaw. The magazine reported that he has been a long-standing backer of Conservative union-busting legislation.

Both Simon and Davis are playing a key role in helping implement Blair's Welfare to Work program, through an agency called "The Prince of Wales Business In The Community" (BITC). As its name suggests, the patron of BITC is Prince Charles, the royal heir. Whenever the latter and fellow members of his species mouth the word "community," the listener need be alert, as what is meant, is a 1990s variant of draconian "sharing the poverty" policies, with a lot of touchy-feely rhetoric about "togetherness" thrown in. Indeed, Simon's British Petroleum and Davis's Prudential are key funders of the fascist "communitarian" movement in Britain. The founder of that movement, Amitai Etzioni, has considerable influence on Blair's entourage, and has enthusiastically endorsed *New Britain*, a book of Blair's speeches.

The 'big stick'

Also in the "Blair chief executives" genre is Harold Evans, the U.S.-based Briton who heads the Random House publishing giant. Evans, former editor of the London *Times*, is a senior figure in the Labour Party-U.S.A. apparatus, the which is being greatly upgraded now that Blair has been elected. Evans and his wife, Tina Brown, chief editor of the *New Yorker* magazine, hosted Tony and Cherie Blair for a 100-person dinner party on June 22, at which attendees included Henry Kissinger, speculator George Soros, and Lazard Frères banker and U.S. ambassador to France-designate Felix Rohatyn.

On July 8, Evans authored a piece in the London *Daily Telegraph* lavishly praising Blair, as if his election were initiating the second coming of the Messiah. At one point, the hyper-ventilating Evans wrote of Blair: "He is in Teddy Roosevelt's mould; he carries a big stick, but he speaks softly."

Britain's workers, just like the inhabitants of Northern Ireland, millions of black Africans, and others, are now experiencing what it is like, to have that "big stick" crash on their head.