

The paper of the Socialist Party. Issue 641.

The Socialist, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD Registered as a newspaper at the Post Office. Published by Socialist Publications, printed by Newsfax International. ISSN 1366-9621

National Shop Stewards Network

The struggle against Con-Dem attacks

AS THE day nears – 20 October – when the details of the Con-Dem government's next attacks on the working class are revealed, so also does discussion within the labour movement intensify on how best to resist them.

There is a growing determination that the government must be confronted head-on and not just in words but with deeds. There is also a great urge for unity on a fighting programme and organisation which can provide a lead to millions whose living standards will be shattered as chancellor George Osborne's axe falls.

The National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) was the first national organisation of the labour movement which sought to express this mood in an organised form. It was the first to organise a national conference after Osborne announced the first series of cuts in his so-called 'emergency budget'. The NSSN also gave the lead – with a tremendous response on the ground from the growing anti-cuts movement – in organising the lobby of the TUC conference.

All activity – demos, meetings, etc – to raise awareness against the cuts is to be welcomed. But the NSSN correctly foresaw that exerting pressure on the leadership of our movement, the trade unions, was the first priority. This paid off when the TUC was forced to respond to the demand for a national demonstration – albeit belatedly for next March. The NSSN also took an important initiative with the most militant unions – RMT, FBU, PCS – in organising the London march to the TUC headquarters on 23 October, which will continue to put pressure on the TUC to call a trade union-organised demonstration this year.

The NSSN is the only anti-cuts organisation which is firmly rooted in the trade unions. Above all, its programme outlines a clear way forward in the struggle against the cuts. At its steering committee on 2 October it outlined a series of measures including taking "the campaign to the wider trade union movement and the community at large at local level". It also stated: "we wish to collaborate with all local and national organisations". But it made

the important qualification: "However, we cannot accept a top-down approach adopted by some organising the fight against the cuts". At the beginning of what promises to be a brutal and drawn-out struggle, it is vital to underline this point.

In recent struggles this, unfortunately, has been the approach by some organisations. The Stop the War Coalition steering committee – dominated by the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) – was top-down, did not have democratic structures, and did not allow the full expression of oppositional views to the SWP. Against the objections of the Socialist Party representatives on the committee, the SWP and their allies bulldozed the decision through the committee to allow a platform to the Liberal Democrats – without any public criticisms of them – before hundreds of thousands at the massive anti-war demonstration in London in February 2003. They also refused to allow any speaker on behalf of a socialist organisation. This tarnished the 'anti-war' credentials of Charles Kennedy and the Lib-Dems. This undoubtedly helped to build up their 'radical' image particularly amongst young people.

Clegg boast

NICK CLEGG boasts of his anti-war stance then, while at the same time enthusiastically embracing Osborne's axe today as well as the continued occupation of Afghanistan! Such mistakes can only be avoided in this battle if hard questions are asked about the character of the coming struggle, the best programme to defeat all the cuts, and the kind of organisations that are needed.

One such issue immediately posed is why all those seriously interested in defeating the cuts are not coming fully behind the NSSN, which is building a fighting coalition. Why, for instance, has a new organisation, the 'Coalition of Resistance' organised a separate conference on 27 November? Initiators of this include some of those ex-members of the SWP and other groups who were in the ascendancy in the Stop the War committee. They have

even claimed that they are the 'main' organisation fighting the cuts. The fact that a few prominent Labour MPs, ex-Labour MPs and trade unionists sponsor a meeting does not give them the authority to claim this.

On the ground, it has been supporters of the NSSN – Socialist Party members and others – who have initiated the majority of anti-cuts committees.

Everybody is, or should be in favour of maximum unity in the common struggle against the cuts. 'But what is your programme?' is the question posed to all organisations and individuals in this battle. We cannot accept, as the NSSN explains, "smaller cuts over a longer period, as advocated by Labour-in-opposition against the big axe and swingeing cuts of the Con-Dem government".

We do not prevent anybody from joining in the struggle – including Labour councillors who are prepared to break ranks – but it must be on a programme of opposing all the cuts, not just the ones implemented by the Con-Dem government but also councils – even Labour councils – which seek the small axe to carry out the wishes of the central government.

It is not a question of seeking a 'hegemonic' position for any one organisation. In many different fields there are already existing fighting organisations – the pensioners' organisations, housing, education, etc. It would be wrong and counter-productive for any organisation to seek to supersede those that already exist and who are, in most cases, doing a good job.

But a generalised struggle is absolutely necessary in this battle which seeks to link up the different strands of opposition. The trade unions are best placed to do this. Unfortunately, right-wing trade union leaders merely pay lip service to this task. The NSSN does not seek to replace unions but to act as a lever in the struggle, as it has done in organising with the left unions on 23 October. This is why the NSSN has called a national conference in January as the accompanying article demonstrates.

Unfortunately, the SWP representatives on

the NSSN steering committee, having voted unanimously for this proposal, then distributed a leaflet on the 'Right to Work' demonstration at the Tory Party conference proposing an alternative 'unity' conference on 5 December! This is clearly aimed at cutting across the NSSN's effort one month later.

This approach is quite common to the SWP. Others will organise a meeting on a specific date and they will try to counter this with a separate event, sometimes even on the same day and same venue but half an hour earlier! For example, the NSSN, including Socialist Party members of its steering committee, has tried to avoid its annual conference clashing with the SWP's 'Marxism' event but the SWP-led Unite Against Fascism has organised a demo to clash with Socialism 2010.

In fact UAF has not yet replied to the invite to come to Socialism 2010 to debate the serious questions of how to defeat the far right which was sent in July. Along this road is nothing but sectarian madness and unnecessary divisions within what should be a common struggle, albeit with a debate on strategy and tactics.

We are sure that the NSSN supporters will attend all meetings and activities called against the cuts. They, and the Socialist Party, certainly, will attend events like those called on 27 November. But we will do so in order to make firm proposals for a common struggle and to press for mobilisation behind the NSSN.

Many speak about the lessons of the poll tax – some organising meetings on 'how it was defeated' when they actually opposed the struggle in its initial phases – but the real lessons are ignored. It was not the official trade union leaders, the national or local leaderships of the Labour Party that defeated the tax but the huge efforts of the Anti-Poll Tax Federation in the non-payment campaign.

Something along similar lines can provide the necessary programme and organisation to defeat this present Con-Dem onslaught. Unity is vital but not of the graveyard variety. An action programme, an action organisation to defeat the cuts, is what is required and the NSSN is best suited to this task.

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National conference called against cuts in jobs and services

AFTER A very successful TUC lobby and the first national demo against cuts in Manchester just a few weeks ago, the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) steering committee has taken a unanimous decision to follow up with a national conference to stop cuts to jobs and services. The provisional date is Saturday 22 January.

Linda Taaffe,
secretary NSSN

At the meeting the feeling was expressed that the NSSN had played a role in influencing the TUC to call a national demo, albeit next year. Many spoke about the positive responses that the lobby of rank and file trade unionists had engendered, and reported enthusiasm for regional events against the massive Con-Dem cuts being prepared.

NSSN supporters in London, Wales and Manchester, amongst others are now organising demonstrations in conjunction with unions like PCS, RMT, FBU, NUT and others around the time of the comprehen-



Lobbying the TUC.

photo Paul Mattsson

sive spending review.

It is crucial that any fight to save jobs and services must have well-organised trade unions at ground level at the core of the struggle. All felt that the NSSN has established a real track record, especially over the

last year and since the onset of the financial crisis, and has earned the respect of many trade unions both at national and local level.

At the same time there are millions of workers not yet in unions, like part-time women workers, students struggling with fees and debts, the growing ranks of unemployed and those subject to swingeing welfare cuts.

Also massive reductions in services are giving rise to lively local campaigns about privatisation in schools, hospitals, Royal Mail and cuts to libraries, services for elderly and disabled etc.

The NSSN appeals to both trade unionists and anti-cuts campaigners – young workers and students, black and white, men and women, young and old – to support this conference.

Let's make a start in thrashing out a real strategy for action in the struggle to create a force that can defeat this vicious cobbled-together millionaire government. If we defeated Margaret Thatcher, the iron lady, on the poll tax, we can do the same to Tory boys Cameron and Clegg!