

PCS fights to defend jobs and pensions

PCS'S NATIONAL Executive Committee (NEC) has rejected a "final offer" on the Civil Service Compensation Scheme (CSCS) from the Tory/Liberal government. The previous Labour government attempted to force PCS to accept new arrangements that would have stolen members' accrued rights and entitlements. Labour, and now the Con-Dem government, wanted to drive through tens of thousands of job cuts and privatise services as cheaply as possible.

John McNally
vice-president PCS
personal capacity

PCS members took three days of strike action in March and, when the other five unions in the Council of Civil Service Unions (CCSU) agreed detrimental changes to the scheme, PCS continued the fight. PCS won two legal victories, establishing that the government's action was illegal and obliging ministers to negotiate with the union if they wanted to make changes to the scheme. Following the legal victory PCS tried to re-open negotiations but was ignored by the Cabinet office.

Talks were opened with CCSU but

only after civil service minister, the arrogant millionaire Francis Maude, attempted to get round the law by introducing new primary legislation, in effect trying to hold a gun to negotiators' heads.

The use of a so-called Money Bill is intended to avoid proper Parliamentary scrutiny. The Speaker is shortly to rule on whether he considers this a legitimate device for such legislation. It is also hoped that the Money Bill will end our opposition to the government's attempt to cut the CSCS in an even more draconian fashion than Labour intended.

The Tories always intended to bring in far harsher proposals as they prepare for the most savage civil service cuts since the 1920s.

European law

PCS BELIEVES the legislation is probably contrary to European law, specifically the Human Rights Act which specifies a government cannot legislate to remove a person's possessions. Pensions are "possessions", and so should be accrued rights under the CSCS. If this is so and the legislation is forced through, it will open up a major legal battle in Europe that might take years to re-



Defending the Civil Service Compensation Scheme is linked to preventing cuts.

photo S. Beishon

solve and allow any worker made redundant under the new legislation the opportunity to claim compensation, something that could run into billions for the government.

Attempt to isolate

MAUDE NOW claims the five other CCSU unions sued for a settlement behind PCS's back. This was an attempt to exclude and isolate PCS, presumably on the basis that Maude could then go out and claim the other unions were the reasonable ones and PCS would never accept any deal. This is a direct lift from the tactics of the previous Labour government, but it has backfired.

The Prison Officers Association has now issued a statement denying it was party to any such agreement. The GMB and Unite have stated that they have agreed nothing and their members will be balloted. Maude has therefore deliberately attempted to mislead civil servants.

Negotiated settlement

PCS REPRESENTS over 80% of workers covered by the scheme and no

deal can stick without its agreement. PCS was proved right in challenging the previous proposals in the courts and in the process winning greater legal protection for members. PCS's position on a negotiated settlement is quite clear, we believe an agreement is possible but only if it is fair to all parties, recognises accrued rights and is fair to new entrants.

Even before the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) on 20 October we have seen cuts go ahead, including the recent shocking decision to close Newport Passport Office, an ideological cut if ever there was one, the Identity and Passport Service is self-financing.

Determined

THE COALITION is determined to slash the CSCS in order to drive through the cuts planned in the CSR. That is why the unions in CCSU who have broken ranks should examine their actions very closely and stop helping Maude to divide us in the face of these threats.

PCS's NEC has agreed to hold a policy (indicative) ballot of members and will recommend rejection

of these proposals but will also ask members to endorse the union's strategy to defend jobs, pensions, services and conditions.

Overwhelming support in the ballot for the NEC's position will send the clearest possible message to those in the other unions who are compromising unity – get back into talks with CCSU and hammer out an acceptable settlement.

Simple message

IT IS almost beyond belief that the four "Moderate/4 the members" members on the NEC voted against all the proposals to fight these attacks, including bizarrely, the recommendation to write to Maude to resume talks.

PCS reiterates its simple message, these cuts are neither necessary nor inevitable, there is an alternative based on job creation, investment and tax justice and if we organise in our workplaces and communities we can defeat them.

The battle to defend the CSCS is inextricably linked to defeating the cuts and PCS will continue to fight for a fair deal.

An attack on low-paid workers

THE MONEY Bill would drastically cut members' existing rights, would cap all compulsory redundancies at a maximum of 12 months' pay and limit voluntary exits to 15 months' salary. The latest "final" offer contains only slight improvements and savagely cuts members' existing entitlements. The cap on voluntary redundancy has been increased to 21 months and the underpin for the lowest paid to 90% of average pay. But there is no protection, transitional or otherwise, for accrued rights and the bill would introduce changes to notice periods, for example from six to three months for compulsory redundancy and limits scope for redeployment across departments.

PCS rejected the previous offer under Labour because it only protected 50% of our members, on the basis of a £60,000 underpin and a cap of two years. The new offer has no provision for members to earn any more than 21 months' salary or protection of accrued rights.

The proposals will be detrimental to the majority of our existing members earning more than £20,000 with accrued rights to two or more years of service. The proposals do include a method of protecting the lowest paid. PCS welcomes this improvement for many low paid staff but says the median should be higher. However the absence of an acceptable underpin, reserved rights or transitional protection leaves many worse off than their accrued rights. To sign an agreement on this basis would mean handing over the legal protection achieved at Judicial Review and would mean forgoing our rights to legal action – that is not going to happen.

No to academy schools!

LEILA GALLOWAY, a parent of two children at Tidemill primary school in Deptford, south London, is leading a campaign to stop Tidemill becoming an academy school, free from local authority control. In academies – where private investors take over schools and they are allowed to operate for profit – parents and teachers worry that private profit will eventually become the only motive.

Leila spoke to The Socialist:

"THIS IS my community. I feel very strongly that education should not be driven for profit. Academy schools are taken out of local control. The academies scheme is based largely on America's charter system where, research shows, schools are prone to social segregation. The writing's on the wall for it to happen here.

The government rushed legislation for academies through quicker than an anti-terrorist act. I think it's an erosion of human rights. Schools are centres of the community; in Tidemill architects built a new school alongside a resource centre, libraries, galleries – a vision of community in Deptford.

700 new flats are now being built in the area – the new tenants may not have kids now but may do in the future. Their children will need good accountable schools. If Tidemill became an academy, it would only be accountable to the secretary of state.

No councillors, just a politician who knows nothing about individual schools.

I believe in comprehensive education. We've come a long way over the years in making education not a question of privilege, but academies drain money from other schools and they will be able to select their pupils. It is a huge social experiment.

Governors

EVEN IF the present governors are OK, who knows what will happen in years to come. The school will be driven by profit – if a form of education costs too much, it won't be allowed to happen.

I've canvassed local estates with a petition demanding full consultation. I'm horrified at the depth of poverty.

Many parents don't speak English as a first language. They will find it hard to fight for their rights if any-

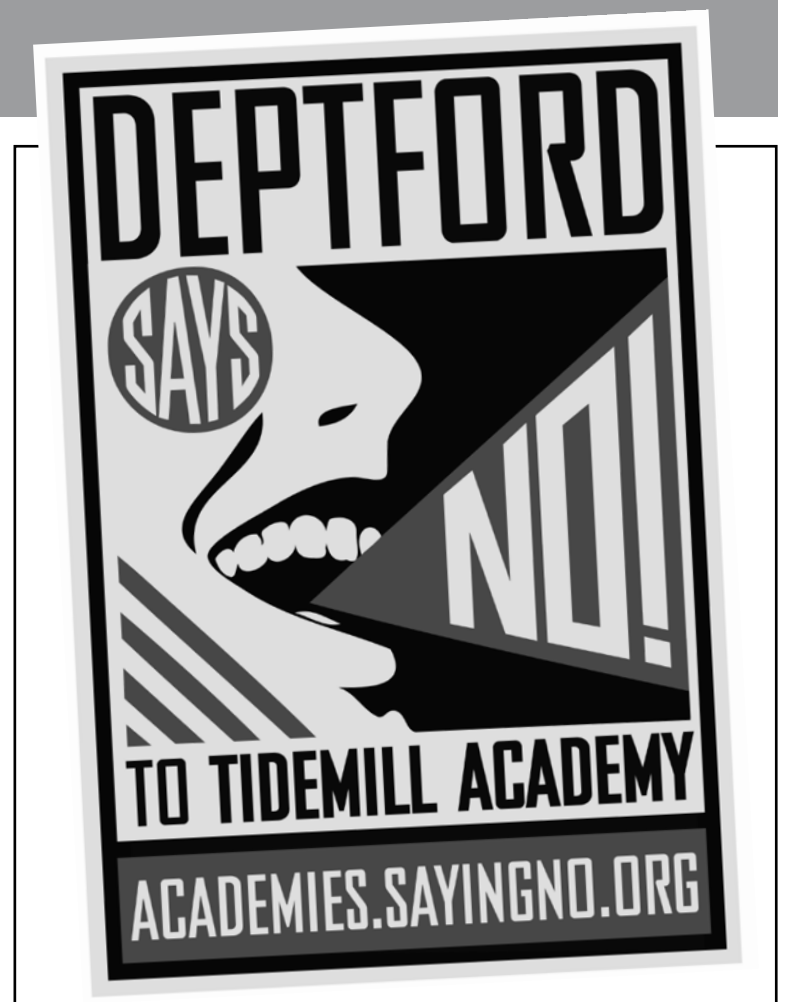
thing goes wrong at the academy.

Nobody has got an overview. How can they make a decision when no alternative voices can be raised? And why aren't the councillors up in arms? If they let academies happen, what happens to councils?

But if the councillors won't fight, we will! The academies scheme has not been a success for the government – only 32 schools are following up the scheme. Many of those advising the government on academies are hedge fund bankers!

Our campaign, along with teachers' unions, is making contact with local people, not just parents at Tidemill but at other schools that will lose out from having an academy in the area. We want to build up power in the communities, and use it against this disastrous academy idea that the headteacher wants to force through so quickly."

More information on:
academies.sayingno.org



A 'No to Tidemill Academy' campaign poster.