

NSSN debate: The way forward for the anti-cuts movement

ONE ISSUE dominates all others for the workers' movement now and for the foreseeable future – how to defeat the avalanche of cuts and tax rises that is engulfing us. On 22 January, the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) has called a national anti-cuts conference, which could make a crucial difference to the anti-cuts movement's success.

Hannah Sell,
Socialist Party
deputy general secretary

This conference will bring together workplace representatives with local anti-cuts campaigns to bring 'unions and communities together to save all jobs and services'. The motion will emphasise the importance of struggling against all cuts in jobs and services, which is essential to prevent the movement being divided between different sections of workers and thereby defeated. It will also stress the trade union movement's key role in struggling against the cuts; and the importance of linking up with community anti-cuts campaigns. It will propose the election of a national steering committee for the NSSN initiated anti-cuts campaign.

The motion will simply state that the NSSN should launch a national anti-cuts campaign to bring 'unions and communities together to save all jobs and services'. The motion will emphasise the importance of struggling against all cuts in jobs and services, which is essential to prevent the movement being divided between different sections of workers and thereby defeated. It will also stress the trade union movement's key role in struggling against the cuts; and the importance of linking up with community anti-cuts campaigns. It will propose the election of a national steering committee for the NSSN initiated anti-cuts campaign.

The NSSN already has an excellent record in the anti-cuts struggle, being the first national labour movement organisation to organise a national conference after chancellor George Osborne's first bloodbath emergency budget. It then organised the lobby of the TUC conference which received a tremendous response from the growing anti-cuts movement.

All activity – demos, meetings etc – to raise awareness against the cuts is welcome. 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 26 March. We now need to build to make sure the demonstration is massive, and to use it to build for a one-day public sector general strike.

The NSSN kept up the pressure on the unions to act, not least by building the anti-cuts movement on the ground. It played a key role in founding many of the local anti-cuts unions and in instigating the 23 October regional trade union demonstrations against the cuts in London, Bristol, Cardiff, Manchester and elsewhere.

Our strategy and tactics could make the difference between the movement's success or failure. So we support unity, but around a programme, strategy and tactics that can defeat the government.

At this early stage in the anti-cuts movement there is inevitably a strong urge to unity. Some who attend the conference may initially feel it would be better to brush over the issues being debated to have a seemingly more united conference. We agree that the maximum possible unity should be fought for. But this cannot be achieved by ignoring our differences on anti-cuts strategy.

Our strategy and tactics could make the difference between the movement's success or failure. So we support unity, but around a programme, strategy and tactics that can defeat the government. It is not 'sectarian' to suggest that programme matters. For example if we all united around the very limited programme of action put forward by the TUC leadership we would obviously doom our movement to defeat.

Labour councils

THE NSSN majority fights for a clear working class anti-cuts movement based in the trade unions and workplaces, but also linking up with community anti-cuts campaigns. Behind the disparate arguments of those who oppose the NSSN launching an anti-cuts campaign lie clear differences on programme, strategy and tactics for the anti-cuts movement.

The cutting edge of these differences is the attitude to Labour councils. The NSSN majority believes that, to be successful, the anti-cuts movement must oppose all cuts in jobs, pensions and services; whether carried out by central government or by local authorities. Local councils are setting their budgets, facing drastically reduced funding from central government, and every single council proposes to set a budget which dramatically cuts jobs and services.

The Tory chair of the Local Government Association estimates that 100,000 local authority jobs will go in 2011. The Socialist Party argues that Labour councils should set a budget which does not cut jobs and services, and then launch a campaign to demand extra funding from central government to plug the gap.

If necessary, councils could temporarily plug the gap from council reserves to give time to build up a campaign against the government. If a number of councils were to adopt this strategy it would be possible not only to force the government to retreat but to bring it down.

Opposition to launching an NSSN anti-cuts campaign is, in reality, opposition to an anti-cuts campaign organised around such a clear programme. However, this is hidden behind the cloak of 'unity', with the argument that setting up another anti-cuts campaign, in addition to the Coalition of Resistance (CoR) and Right to Work (RTW) would further fragment the anti-cuts movement and that instead a "single united campaigning group" is needed to oppose the cuts.

The argument against setting up another anti-cuts campaign is disingenuous. Both the CoR and RTW were established considerably after the NSSN. Members of the NSSN steer-



NSSN played a key role in organising regional anti-cuts demonstrations.

photo Paul Mattsson

ing committee who now oppose the NSSN launching an anti-cuts campaign played a key role in launching both CoR and RTW.

We would have much preferred them, as we argued, to adopt the NSSN as the best-placed organisation to fight the cuts. Nonetheless we did not try to deny their right to set up their own campaigns, which is what they are now trying to impose on the NSSN. On the contrary, we argued for cooperation with both the CoR and RTW.

At local level we recognise that, at this stage, many local anti-cuts bodies are likely to send representatives to meetings of all three national anti-cuts conferences. However, whether "one single united campaigning group" would be a step forward depends on whether it was organised around a fighting programme.

Unfortunately, for the NSSN to try and create one united campaign by coming behind either the Coalition of Resistance or Right to Work would weaken, rather than strengthen, the movement against cuts.

Coalition of Resistance

UNLIKE THE NSSN, the CoR effectively declares itself to be the anti-cuts movement's leadership. However, it has no basis for doing so. It has the support of some high profile individuals and union leaders, but is not representative of most local anti-cuts bodies and trade union campaigns. Even more importantly, it does not have a programme that takes the

movement forward.

Formally, the Coalition of Resistance declares that it will: "Oppose all cuts and privatisation." However, it remains silent on whether this includes cuts carried out by New Labour councils. Their conference showed that many of those involved in leading the CoR accept that local councils have no choice but to unwillingly wield the government's axe.

This includes Labour councillors, but also Green Party members such as Samir Jeeraj, a platform speaker in the workshop on "what should political representatives do?", who argued that "many tools used by radical councils in the 1980s are no longer available to councillors," so it is no longer possible to take the 'Liverpool and Lambeth road'.

This is simply not accurate. Successive governments have undermined local government's powers but councils still control massive budgets which have a huge impact on people's lives. In addition the government is making local councils responsible for administering many other cuts, from housing benefit to EMA.

Some at the CoR conference argued a different viewpoint, notably Ted Knight, Lambeth council leader when it defied the Tory government in the 1980s, but they were given no opportunity to put their views to the full conference. In the NSSN we are anxious to have a democratic discussion on this crucial question. In the CoR, by contrast, the approach has been to avoid discussion on this issue to try to keep councillors on board.

RTW, in reality run by the Socialist Workers Party, has an even worse position on this issue. This reflects the SWP's growing opportunism, although this is still combined with ultra-left mistakes particularly in the industrial field – recently both condemning the London FBU for suspending its strike action, and alienating many BA strikers by occupying their talks.

The protocol that RTW and CoR agreed on working together included only one point on their programme and strategy to defeat cuts – that both campaigns would "work with Labour Party members who supported the aims of the campaigns". We agree with involving Labour Party members who want to oppose cuts; but we do not agree with involving Labour councillors who claim to oppose cuts while voting for them in the council chamber.

Prepare the movement

FOR THIS 'crime' the SWP have consistently attacked us for being 'sectarian'. They put the essence of their argument in a Central Committee statement in their pre-conference bulletin which says:

"We reject the sectarian argument that Labour councillors should be excluded because the last Labour government pushed through cuts, and planned its own if it had won the 2010 election. We do not agree that such councillors should be presented with an ultimatum that they can only be part of the anti-cuts movement if they sign up never to make any cuts in any

circumstances."

The Socialist Party will enthusiastically support any councillors prepared to vote against cuts today, even if they supported cuts in the past. However, New Labour's record nationally and locally of consistently supporting cuts, privatisation and other pro-big business measures, makes it correct to warn anti-cuts activists that no more than a handful of Labour councillors are likely to be prepared to vote against cuts.

To date we do not know of a single Labour councillor who has defied the cuts. This contrasts sharply with the 1980s, when the trade unions and working class could still exert some pressure on the Labour Party leadership via its democratic structures.

When it came to the crunch only Militant-led (now the Socialist Party) Liverpool city council, alongside Lambeth, was prepared to defy the government. Another 18 Labour councils, however, at least pledged to do so, before betraying the struggle at a later stage. Today, New Labour is a capitalist party and as a result not one Labour council is prepared to even consider defying the government.

To build up New Labour councillors as leaders of the movement, without a word of criticism of them for failing to actually oppose the cuts, is to prepare the movement for betrayals and defeats. There is a clear comparison with the movement against the Iraq war. The leadership of both CoR and RTW led the Stop the War Coalition, whose 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 Socialist Party representatives on the committee, the SWP and their allies bulldozed the decision through the committee to allow the Liberal Democrats a platform – without any public criticisms of them – before hundreds of thousands at the massive February 2003 anti-war demonstration in London.

They also refused to allow any speaker on behalf of a socialist organisation. This tarnished Charles Kennedy and the Lib-Dems' 'anti-war' credentials and helped build their 'radical' image particularly amongst young people. Today Nick Clegg boasts of his anti-war stance then, while enthusiastically embracing Osborne's axe today and the continued occupation of Afghanistan! To repeat the same mistake in the anti-cuts movement today would have even more serious consequences.

The Socialist Party instead argues that anti-cuts campaigns should demand that, if they are not willing to fight, councillors should stand aside for those who will. We are encouraging local anti-cuts campaigns to stand candidates in next May's council elections on a clear platform of opposition to all cuts.

To maintain the unity of the NSSN Socialist Party members withdrew any reference to this from the steering committee resolution, leaving it open for supporters of the resolution to hold different views on this crucial aspect of the movement. However, even this major concession was not enough to win over our opponents on the steering committee. Only agreeing to complete inaction by the NSSN would have been sufficient.

Right to Work

OUR OPPONENTS are supporters of RTW, the CoR and also a few syndicalists who want the NSSN to be limited to a discussion group for workplace representatives. They will have every opportunity to argue their case at the conference. In its democracy the NSSN conference will be markedly different to other national anti-cuts bodies. In that sense it could be argued that this will be the only national anti-cuts conference; as opposed to an anti-cuts rally.

The CoR founding conference had 21 platform speakers but gave no opportunity for speakers from the floor in the plenary sessions. Even in the workshops Socialist Party members were systematically not called into the discussions.

Right to Work has no real democratic structures. A steering committee is elected at the RTW conference, but appears to have never met. Instead decisions are made by the SWP.

SWP members themselves recognise this, as one member states in their pre-conference bulletin: "As far as I am aware, (and I am writing in October 2010) there has not been a single meeting of the full steering committee since that conference... and there is no mechanism for affili-

ated organisations to have any input into the campaign."

By contrast the NSSN steering committee has had a thorough, democratic debate on the proposals for three hours, with all those who wanted to speak doing so. And the conference will, if the Socialist Party's proposals are agreed, give equal time to speakers for and against the steering committee's proposal; both from the platform and the floor of the conference.

To build up New Labour councillors as leaders of the movement, without a word of criticism of them for failing to actually oppose the cuts, is to prepare the movement for betrayals and defeats.

If the motion is passed, conference will democratically elect an accountable campaigns committee.

Our opponents attack the Socialist Party for pushing ahead with our proposal without support from other forces in the NSSN. This is not true, as the conference will demonstrate; many of those involved in building the NSSN support our viewpoint. However, it is true that in the NSSN leadership it is Socialist Party members that support the majority resolution.

This reflects the early stage of the NSSN's development; where its steering committee has until now involved all those who volunteer for it, and is mainly made up of activists from different left currents. The NSSN will

need to work to draw in a wider layer of working-class militants to its leadership bodies in the next period.

The Socialist Party is also accused of wanting to split the NSSN. This is completely untrue. Whatever happens at the 22 January conference we want to continue to develop the NSSN. Unfortunately, we are not sure the same can be said of our opponents on the steering committee.

In their most recent statement they say the conference "is likely to be decisive in determining the [NSSN's] future." What does this mean? Does it mean they will leave the NSSN if the motion to set up an anti-cuts campaign is passed?

We appeal to all NSSN supporters to attend the conference and judge the issues for yourselves. We are still in the early stages of the anti-cuts movement. In every struggle, at this point, many different strategies are vying for adoption. This was the case in the movement against the poll tax, for example.

The strategy of mass non-payment which eventually defeated the government and brought down Thatcher was supported by the Socialist Party (then the Militant) but was opposed, initially at least, by the SWP and most of the forces today in the CoR.

Even today many of them miseducate a new generation by suggesting it was the riot, and not the 18 million non-payers, that was central to the victory. The struggle today is different to that against the poll tax in many ways, not least because it is far more multi-faceted.

Which organisation has the best strategy for victory will be tested in the struggle itself, as it was in the poll tax and other battles. However, it is essential that there is a national anti-cuts body which puts forward a clear, independent, working class programme and strategy. If the NSSN anti-cuts conference adopts the resolution put by the majority of the steering committee it will mark an important step in this direction.



photo Paul Mattsson



photo Paul Mattsson