

# PCS members vote for battle against cuts

inbrief

**P**UBLIC AND Commercial Services (PCS) members have given a resounding 90% 'yes' in an indicative ballot to reject the government's proposals to rip up their contracts and steal accrued rights on redundancy payments under the Civil Service Compensation Scheme (CSCS).

**John McNally,**  
PCS national vice president  
(personal capacity)

The government's aim is to drive through job cuts and privatisation as cheaply as possible. Members also voted 'yes' by 96% to support the national executive committee's (NEC) There is an Alternative campaign to oppose the cuts and privatisation agenda, including attacks on pay, pensions, jobs and services.

The scale of the 'yes' vote in both cases is staggeringly high – 90% rejected the CSCS proposals and 96% supported the NEC's campaign on a 32% turnout. It is a tremendous endorsement of the NEC's strategy.

The right wing on the NEC opposed the cuts campaign, arguing that cuts are inevitable.

It is a vindication of the campaigning lead given by a leadership that has demonstrated it will not roll over in the face of attacks but will organise to oppose them, involving members and activists at all stages.

The coalition decided to push legislation through parliament rather than obey the High Court rulings that said they must seek a settlement with the union if they wanted to make changes to the



PCS members protesting against the cuts.

photo Paul Mattsson

CSCS. PCS tried hard to reach a settlement including proposing that redundancy payments under any new scheme be more fairly distributed in favour of the low-paid, the overwhelming majority of civil servants. This was rejected by cabinet office multi-millionaire minister Francis Maude.

The government now faces a potentially damaging and costly legal battle under European legislation and possible further industrial action. PCS is calling on the government to reach a fair and reasonable settlement, and there will be no peace on this issue without one.

From the start PCS clearly stated there was no need for any cuts what-

soever. We argue that there is an alternative to workers paying for the crisis created by the banks and the unregulated free market through tax justice, investment and job creation.

Any socialist knows the limitations of such a Keynesian solution but PCS conference policy, as developed by the union's Democracy Alliance NEC, not only exposes the lie "there is no alternative" and "we are all in it together" but importantly, demonstrates that a real alternative exists to cuts and privatisation.

General secretary Mark Serwotka was described as a "fundamentalist" at a TUC executive meeting for espousing this principled position

but the real problem for the "there must be cuts" brigade within our movement is, which cuts then? Who deserves to lose their job and which services can people do without?

Unsurprisingly there is never a straight answer to these simple questions.

If this ballot has demonstrated anything it is that when workers are given a lead by a committed, campaigning union leadership then their confidence and determination is galvanised.

PCS will build the campaign through workplace meetings and build for the industrial action that is absolutely inevitable if the government does not back off.

## Pensions ballot



photo Paul Mattsson

Teachers' union NUT members are participating in a survey about action over pensions. The education department is threatening to increase contributions from 6.4% to as much as 10% of salary. The NUT executive meets on 18 January to consider the results of the survey, so all NUT members should make sure their executive member supports an urgent ballot for strike action. Members of the lecturers' union UCU will be balloting for strike action on jobs, pay and pensions. Higher education branches from 2 February to 2 March and further education branches and members in post-1992 universities from 23 February to 11 March.

## Birmingham bins

The recently planned strikes by Birmingham bin workers were called off at the last minute by the trade unions. They say that negotiations have produced enough to call off the industrial action. Negotiations are proceeding as the bin workers clear the backlog of rubbish. But it seems that the workforce is still facing major pay cuts and a worsening of working conditions, whilst the position of agency workers is increasingly precarious.

## Hull workers fight sacking

At midnight on 12 January, Lovells housing maintenance workers in Hull were told that they were no longer going to be paid. In effect they were being sacked. What has happened to these workers is a timely warning to all public sector workers who face privatisation. It also gives the lie to Cameron's claims that the private sector is better at doing public sector work. The workers used to be part of the direct labour force in Hull city council. The last Labour government "outsourced" the housing maintenance work to three arms length companies - Keir, Connaughts and Kingston Works Limited (KWL). In July last year Connaughts went bust. Under the original agreement, the Connaughts workers should have been taken back into Hull city council's employment. Instead Carl Minns, the Liberal leader of the council, sold the workers and the work to Lovells, another private firm. Ken Thompson, UCATT steward, explained that: "The workers are demanding that the council either takes them and the work back in house or organises their transfer to KWL and Keir."

**Mick Whale**

• See [www.socialistparty.org.uk](http://www.socialistparty.org.uk) for more details.

## Heinz strikes force improved offer

**F**OUR SOLID strikes by 1,000+ workers at the Heinz plant in Wigan have forced a significantly improved offer from the company.

Members of the Unite union are now voting over whether to accept the offer of a two-year deal, for 3.9% pay rises in each year plus guarantees on the bonus scheme. The offer was made following talks on 12 January.

Ian Wright, acting convenor for Unite, told me: "I think the offer's adequate, it's not brilliant, it's not inflation, but it's probably what will float our members' boats... Now we're just waiting for the ballot result which will be out on 18 January."

Unite put in a pay claim last spring for 4.3%, fractionally above the rate of inflation. Previously management had shown no interest in negotiating with Unite, only talks which went nowhere while inflation eroded pay.

In between strike days, Heinz offered a derisory 0.2% above what was on the table a year ago, except with more strings attached. Workers rejected this by 2:1 in a ballot and took strike action again on 11 January. Strikers on the picket line then expressed absolute determination to continue the struggle, and had notified Heinz of another 24-hour strike on Wednesday 19 January.

**Hugh Caffrey**

# Strike at sweatshop DWP centres

**P**CS MEMBERS in Jobcentre Plus who have been compulsorily transferred from benefit processing into contact centres will be taking strike action on 20 and 21 January over our working conditions.

**Katrine Williams**  
PCS DWP group vice president

The only thing that is important to our management is hitting call centre targets about how many calls are answered and how quickly the public can be fobbed off.

We are angry that the quality of the calls and really dealing with the public takes a low priority.

We clearly see that the work of coping with high volumes of calls is just being shunted to our fellow PCS members in benefit processing. This is frustrating for us as we are prevented from addressing the individual's issues and frustrating for the public as there will be further delays in being dealt with whilst they wait for a call back within three hours from busy processing teams. January is always a really busy month with large numbers of people making claims for Jobseekers' Allowance.

Customer service is constantly being quoted at us as the reason for the reorganisation. But as experienced benefit processors, we can clearly see ways that our jobs could be improved by being able to resolve more on the phone and straightaway with the public. This would also remove some of the inefficiency and delays that are built into this system.

The quality of services is really important, given the drive from the



Fighting against low pay at the DWP.

photo The Socialist

previous government and pushed forward by the coalition government, to limit people's access to public services. More and more is being done remotely by phone and the internet rather than face to face.

Our members can be disciplined for inefficiency if they continue to spend too long on the phone, using their judgement when dealing with the public and not conforming to the rigidly tight call times target.

After winning a ballot with an over 70% 'yes' vote for strike action in November, management was brought back to the negotiating table for talks over Christmas and New Year.

The talks broke down on 10 January when it became clear that management has no respect for our members nor the services we want to deliver to the public. Our members have worked flat out during the recession and continue to do so

with the high unemployment since. But the Jobcentre Plus contact centre management does not believe that we can provide services without being constantly monitored every minute of the day.

We are building for a strong turnout on the strike days. If management refuses to move then we are ready to ballot all the contact centre staff across Jobcentre Plus to escalate the dispute.

The strike affects around 3,500 workers in Bristol, Chorlton, Glasgow, Makerfield, Newport, Norwich, and Sheffield.

Please send messages of support to PCS DWP Group via email to [leads@pcs.org.uk](mailto:leads@pcs.org.uk). Financial support is also very welcome and any donations can be sent to PCS Leeds, 3rd Floor, Town Centre House, Merriam Centre, Leeds, LS2 8LY. Cheques should be made payable to PCS DWP Group Hardship Account.