

National Shop Stewards Network Anti-cuts campaign launched

Democratic debate results in big majority for fighting strategy

NEARLY 600 people, mostly workers with elected positions in trade union branches, trades councils, workplaces and anti-cuts alliances, filled a hall on 22 January for the special anti-cuts conference of the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN).

Judy Beishon
Socialist Party executive committee

Most of the conference agenda was devoted to democratic debate on two motions. One, from a majority of the NSSN steering committee, proposed that the NSSN launches an "anti-cuts campaign, bringing trade unions and communities together to save all jobs and services".

The other motion, from a minority of the steering committee, proposed that the NSSN should not launch an anti-cuts campaign, and instead should "do everything constructive, through discussions with Coalition of Resistance, Right to Work and other groups, to build and launch a single national anti-cuts organisation early in 2011".

In the vote after the debate, a potentially highly significant step forward for the anti-cuts movement was taken when 305 trade union branch and workplace representatives ensured the victory of motion one, against 89 for motion two. Nearly 200 observers and anti-cuts campaign representatives also attended the conference but were not part of this vote, to respect the democratic structure of the NSSN.

A committee of eleven people, six from trade unions and five from community anti-cuts campaigns, was then elected unopposed, to lead the NSSN's new anti-cuts campaign.

Programme for victory

THIS DECISION, taken after the most thorough and democratic debate yet in the anti-cuts movement, has opened the door to the creation of a national body that can democratically involve and coordinate the widest possible layer of workers, community activists and students in countering the Con-Dem government's onslaught, armed with a programme and strategy for victory.

The proposers of the new campaign have made it clear that they will discuss with the other national anti-cuts organisations and explore the extent to which united work can be achieved.

Before the conference debate got underway, there were short platform speeches from Steve Bell about the Med-direct health workers' dispute, Mark Bergfeld from the National Union of Students, Stu Melvin from Reading 'Save our Services' and Alex Gordon, president of the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers' union (RMT).

Alex Gordon reminded everyone that the NSSN was set up five years ago as an initiative of the RMT and has since organised many protests, fringe meetings at trade union conferences and other events.

He complimented the NSSN's "inclusive and non-sectarian" way of conducting conferences as contrasting with a "top down, platform speaker led approach adopted in the past and even today by some other organisations".

On the day's debate, Alex warned that if the NSSN was to take a spectator seat, to



Part of the large audience.

photos Paul Mattsson

not engage in the battle against the government's austerity measures, it would damage its credibility in the eyes of all serious trade unionists who are fighting the attacks.

As the pre-conference discussions were sharp at times, he received applause for urging: "No splits, no recriminations, no gifts to those who wish ill to what we've built".

Moving motion one, NSSN secretary Linda Taaffe stressed that the "enormous power of workers" has to be unleashed to stop the worst attacks on people's living standards since 1922.

This means following the TUC demonstration on 26 March with a one-day public sector strike, as a step towards a one-day general strike involving the private sector as well.

But we're not just fighting cuts from the government, said Linda, but also those being imposed by Labour councillors, who say in words they are opposed to cuts but most of them go on to vote for cuts in the council chambers.

Movers of motion one advocate that Labour councils should refuse to pass on government cuts, as Liverpool and Lambeth councils did in the 1980s. Movers of motion two, however, want to "stroke the feathers" of Labour councillors, which sends out the wrong message on the choice these councillors have: to reject cuts or make cuts.

Angry at pre-conference accusations that the movers of motion one are 'splitters' for proposing to set up a third national anti-cuts body, Linda mentioned that the NSSN was set up a long time before Right to Work (RtW) and Coalition of Resistance (CoR), so supporters of these organisations have no substance for their attacks.

We want the NSSN anti-cuts campaign to be as successful as the anti-poll tax campaign was, with its 18 million non-payers, said Linda in her concluding remarks.

Two speakers moved motion two, the first being NSSN treasurer George Binette, who said that trade union and shop steward density is weaker today than it was in the 1980s, so the NSSN's key task is to establish the base for trade union re-

sistance to the cuts.

He argued that everyone in the NSSN is against all cuts and we need a single anti-cuts movement.

Seconding the motion was NSSN steering committee member Pete Firmin, who also put an emphasis on the need for "one democratic anti-cuts campaign".

A lively and fair debate then got underway, as speakers were called in from the floor in equal numbers from the two opposing positions. Two NSSN officers chaired the discussion, one from each side of the debate.

Glenn Kelly, a staff-side rep at Bromley council, answered the movers of motion two by saying that if there was an established national anti-cuts organisation in existence with a strategy for defeating the cuts, then the NSSN wouldn't need to be proposing another one.

We need a united campaign that doesn't just say it's against the cuts but that does something about them, Glenn argued. He also asked why RtW supporters talk about 'unity' when they are setting up local RtW groups as rivals to established local anti-cuts alliances.

Labour councillors and MPs

ON THE issue of what attitude anti-cuts campaigns should take to Labour councillors and MPs, we should work with any that seriously oppose all cuts. But as Socialist Party councillor Dave Nellist pointed out when he spoke: "Labour councillors opposing the cuts on Labour councils are rarer than poor bankers in this country!"

Attempts by members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and RtW (controlled by the SWP) to deny they build up the anti-cuts credentials of Labour Party representatives who will vote for cuts, were undermined by the fact that they were giving out flyers for the RtW convention on 12 February that advertise Labour MP Diane Abbott as a speaker.

Abbott has called for the government and councils to be "mindful" about the race and gender distribution of job losses rather than making a call for no job losses at all and for Labour councils

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Voting for motion one.

not to make them.

SWP member Phoebe Watkins also undermined their protestations when she said uncritically in her contribution that Camden United Against Cuts campaigns with Labour councillors who are "iffy" about the cuts the council is making.

Dave Walsh, delegated from Liverpool trades council, spelt the reality out bluntly when he told of the 4,000 job losses that Liverpool city council is planning and said: "If I go to the workers to say 'work with Labour councillors, I'll need a bodyguard!'".

It is not just what is said, but what is not said. Roger Bannister from Knowsley noted that motion two has no mention of the issue of council-led cuts.

Nancy Taaffe from Waltham Forest Anti-Cuts Union said that when RtW in Walthamstow invited a Labour MP to speak at its anti-cuts meeting that was attended by workers threatened with job losses, it was only Socialist Party members who asked the MP if he would support a council 'deficit budget' to prevent job losses. He said he wouldn't.

The issue of whether all cuts should be fought or whether some have to be accepted, was taken up by John McNally from the PCS union.

He explained that for supporters of motion one, "no cuts and no privatisation has to be unequivocal. Anything less is the road to division and defeat". It's not the number of campaigns that's the issue, but what they stand for, he added.

George Binette had emphasised the weaknesses of the trade union movement rather than its potential strength when moving motion two and this was echoed by several supporters of the motion in the debate.

NSSN steering committee minority and SWP member Ray Morrell repeated the point that the movement is weaker than in the 1970s and 1980s, and added: "The left isn't big enough to lead the anti-cuts movement".

NUJ vice president, Donnacha DeLong, couldn't put enough emphasis on the weaknesses when he said: "The number of shop stewards has been falling and falling and continues to fall. Trade union membership is falling. We don't have a sleeping giant as we had in the 80s".



Steve Hedley, RMT.

On the contrary, the workers' movement is precisely that, a sleeping giant, and it is beginning to wake up. While trade union membership is lower today than in the 1980s, the TUC organises over six million workers and has enormous potential power.

Some of the contributors in favour of motion two were only arguing for the NSSN to continue to build workers' solidarity and the shop stewards' movement.

NSSN remains

BUT NO one in the majority has ever suggested that the NSSN should stop playing this role; the NSSN will remain in existence to further help, coordinate and develop the activist layer in the trade unions.

Unfortunately the chair of the NSSN, Dave Chapple, said in his contribution that he would resign from the NSSN if motion one was agreed, as for him this would indicate domination of the NSSN by the Socialist Party.

This point was taken up by London RMT regional organiser Steve Hedley, who said forcefully that there's no alternative for the NSSN other than to campaign against the cuts: "I can't go back to my workplace and say 'we're not campaigning on these 800 job cuts, let's campaign on workplace stress instead'".

"I'm not in the Socialist Party; we're not talking about any party here, but the NSSN. The NSSN isn't setting itself up as a

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rival campaign, but is putting the organised working class at the forefront of the movement and for that reason I'm asking you to support the majority motion".

Tony Mulhearn, a PCS branch delegate and member of the 'Liverpool 47' councillors who led the socialist Liverpool council in the 1980s, also responded to Dave Chapple's contribution.

He asked the rhetorical question: "Comrades in the majority are trying to impose their will but those in the minority aren't?" He added that in all debates in the labour movement, the different sides involved want their own ideas to win out, but: "what you don't do is take the ball home".

A Socialist Party member involved in building Cardiff Against Cuts, Ross Saunders, showed that the Socialist Party isn't seeking domination of the NSSN anti-cuts campaign.

Instead of local anti-cuts groups being told they "must join CoR or RtW", he described the NSSN majority proposal as a "crucial step to formalise the steps being taken already" by anti-cuts groups forming and linking up with each other, aided by NSSN supporters, as they are doing in south Wales.

Also, Socialist Party member and assistant general secretary of the PCS union, Chris Baugh, made it clear when he spoke that the Socialist Party wants the leaders of all the anti-cuts campaigns to meet together to discuss how the anti-cuts movement can be built.

Another red herring thrown into the discussion, was when a SWP member



Claire Laker-Mansfield.

suggested that students would be excluded from the NSSN anti-cuts campaign.

Socialist Students organiser Claire Laker-Mansfield responded that the student protests have shaken the government and that students have a very important role to play in the anti-cuts campaigning, but they can't "go it alone".

Katrine Williams, in the PCS union and Cardiff Against Cuts also emphasised this point when she said: "The anti-cuts movement needs to involve everyone - students, local community campaigns

etc, but it needs the backbone of the organised working class, which is why the NSSN should set up this campaign".

There were 30 contributions altogether in the debate, 15 for motion one and 15 for motion two. Giving equal time to a minority opinion in the debate, a proposal that was originated by Socialist Party members on the NSSN officers' committee, showed the exemplary democracy of this conference.

In contrast, the conference of CoR had no contributions from the floor in its plenary discussions, never mind allowing minority opinions to be expressed.

Right to Work is advertising a large number of platform speakers for its conference on 12 February, so its plenary sessions may also be largely 'top-down' rallies.

Another aspect of the democracy at this NSSN special conference was that the decision to set up the anti-cuts campaign was regarded as the property of trade union and workplace representatives, as the NSSN was constituted with this layer being the decision makers.

However, while the NSSN will continue to function and develop on this basis, its anti-cuts campaign can have a different voting structure, fully involving anti-cuts bodies in its decision making process.

The democratic, working class backbone of the NSSN can now be taken into the anti-cuts movement in a determined way, to strengthen and build the fightback, demanding no cuts, no privatisations and no tax rises.

Motion 1 - received 305 votes

THE NSSN believes that, given the pace of attacks on living standards by the Con-Dem government, it is now time to give form to our commitment made at the June conference, to take our work "out to the wider community".

We believe that the way to continue carrying out our founding aim "to support trade unions in their campaigns and disputes" is now clearly centred on the fight to STOP ALL CUTS whether through redundancy, reorganisation or privatisation.

We believe that two sections are key to stopping cuts:

- 1) Trade unions at local, regional and national level (and trades councils) with the potential power of six million organised workers, who can organise mass strikes and coordinated joint action.
- 2) Anti-cuts campaigns against

cuts in services, and including students unions, tenants and pensioners organisations, welfare claimants and disability groups, which can all initiate demonstrations, occupations and other direct action without being bound by legal ballots and other restrictions (as shown graphically by the recent student events); or they can organise support to back up trade union actions to stop job cuts and save services.

We therefore propose to:

- a) Launch an "NSSN Anti-Cuts Campaign, bringing trade unions and communities together to save all jobs and services".
- b) Elect a committee of ten, comprised of six from trade unions and four from anti-cuts campaigns - to be elected at the Conference - plus NSSN chair

and secretary.

This committee could also co-opt pro-tem representatives from national/regional unions, and could respond quickly and flexibly to events as they unfold.

Amongst its first tasks would be assisting in:

- Relentless lobbying of councils and councillors, and other bodies, to persuade them NOT to vote for cuts
- Organise a strong contingent for the TUC demo in March
- Campaign for united industrial action by the unions against the cuts
- Produce a regular email organiser to assist and inform
- Use all forms of electronic communication including email, Facebook and the website to promote the anti-cuts campaign.

Motion 2 - received 89 votes

THE NSSN calls upon all its trade union supporters and affiliates to ensure the largest possible turnout for our national anti-cuts conference on 22 January.

We re-affirm our commitment, as trades unionists, to work to build and strengthen the local, regional and national anti-cuts movement, between now and 22 January.

Given our basis as an industrial organisation, the January Conference should concentrate on providing the

widest possible debate on the tactics and strategy needed to ensure that trade union strike action against the cuts begins sooner rather than later, that it is co-ordinated at local and national level, and that if possible it is sustained rather than restricted to token efforts.

It follows from this that this conference should NOT declare the NSSN as THE lead organisation of a national anti-cuts movement; rather, that the NSSN officers and steering committee do eve-

rything constructive, through discussions with Coalition of Resistance, Right to Work and other groups, to build and launch a single national anti-cuts organisation early in 2011.

Whilst conference should allow time for a full and necessary debate concerning trade union bodies supporting anti-cuts candidates in 2011 elections, the NSSN will leave decisions as to whether to stand such candidates to our local and national affiliates.