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Fight the cuts – whoever makes them

THE MASSIVE 27% cut in central government funding to local authorities is having devastating consequences. Manchester city council, for example, has announced that three leisure centres, two swimming pools, five libraries and all but one public toilet will close over the next year.

All youth clubs will be handed to the voluntary sector. Refuse collection will only take place fortnightly. Streets will no longer be cleaned overnight. 2,000 council jobs will be cut. Children's services will be cut by 26% - or £45.1 million. Savings of £39.5 million or 21% will be made from adult services, with charges being introduced.

Over the next month councils up and down the land will announce similar bonfires of public services. Labour council leader, Sir Richard Leese, has said he found making the cuts "unpalatable". But he could have avoided the unpleasant experience for himself, and the misery that his council is heaping on the population of Manchester, if his council had stood up to the government and refused to implement the cuts.

If any council was to do so they would be enormously popular. Trade unionists and anti-cuts campaigners would be able to mobilise tens of thousands of workers in support of such a stand.

Liverpool council

UNFORTUNATELY, NOT a single Labour council has so far been prepared to even contemplate ceasing collaboration with Con-Dem axe men and women and instead stand up and fight. This contrasts sharply with the situation in the 1980s, when Labour was at base a workers' party even though it had a leadership that acted in the interests of the capitalists.

When it came to the crunch in the 1980s only Militant-led 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 Labour is a capitalist party and that is reflected very clearly in the composition of Labour councillors. Even left Labour MP John McDonnell, who does support councils defying

the government, has made the point that Labour councillors are in general among the most right-wing section of the Labour Party; not least because their salaries act as a major incentive to toe the line.

Unfortunately, most Green councillors also seem to argue that the cuts cannot be defied. The convenor of the Green group on Brighton city council (the largest in the country) has stated clearly that: "We can't stop the cuts, but we believe the blow can be softened by adopting an open-book approach ... to find ways to deal with the grievous cuts inflicted upon our city by the government." But this assertion is simply untrue.

Even Labourist.org – the Labour bloggers' website set up by arch-Blairite Derek Draper – published an article by Daniel Blaney saying: "If there was a collective defiance of Eric Pickles [Tory local government minister] by scores of local authorities (essentially going on budget strike), and their act was vindicated by Labour gains in the local elections, it could force a political crisis on the Tory-led coalition. A cascade of 'no cuts' budget decisions by local authorities could be the most effective resistance to the cuts so far."

We agree. In the 1980s Liverpool city council was able to win £60 million in extra funding from the Tory government – fighting without other councils, but with the active support of tens of thousands of workers. Liverpool's councillors were only surcharged and removed from office after a four-year struggle, as a result of the betrayal of the right-wing Labour leadership. A "cascade" of Liverpools would have forced Thatcher from government then, and would defeat the Con-Dem coalition today.

And today councillors can no longer even be surcharged unless they are found guilty of financial crime for personal gain. But it is still true that any council that refused to carry out cuts or introduce hikes in council tax would – at a certain stage – come into conflict with the legal system. However, if the inevitable popularity of such a council was used to mobilise a mass movement it would be very difficult – as in Liverpool – for the law to be used against the councillors.

Most councils, however, have time to prepare before taking this road. By using

their reserves and borrowing powers to avoid making cuts, councils can gain time to build a mass movement in their support. Manchester city council, for example, is estimated to have £100 million in reserves. In addition, Ed Miliband could promise that an incoming Labour government would write off all local authority debts incurred from avoiding cuts.

The article on Labourist went on to emphasise that councillors "face a heavy responsibility" and should not be blamed for implementing the cuts.

Unfortunately, this is also the approach of some anti-cuts organisations. Right to Work, for example, called for a lobby of Manchester Labour council to "show the Con-Dem government that we will stand with our councillors in opposing the cuts" without a mention of the fact that the councillors are voting through enormous cuts.

But the 150,000+ local authority workers whose jobs are on the line will not feel this way. That is why the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) anti-cuts campaign is protesting at the Labour local government conference.

Resist the cuts

THE NSSN campaign will demand that councils stand up against the onslaught raining down on working class communities. If any council does so anti-cuts campaigners will do everything in our power to support it.

But if, as Labour councils have up until now, they continue to refuse to vote against cuts, then they will be lining up with the public service slashers.

The willingness of councils to wield the axes handed down to them by central government means that local council cuts will only be defeated by mass struggle. Forced by a movement from below it cannot be excluded that councils will 'find the courage' to make demands on the government. However, this requires a serious struggle, in which the trade unions have a key role to play, linked to campaigns by local communities in defence of services.

The TUC demonstration on 26 March is likely to be huge and will have a big effect on raising the confidence of workers to struggle.

However, a demonstration alone will not be enough. It needs to be a step towards coordinated strike action – beginning with a one-day public sector general strike. This demand has wide support among trade unionists. At a 250-strong Hackney Unison meeting, for example, there was unanimous support for it.

Unfortunately, the majority of the leadership of the trade unions do not have the same determination to fight. In reality, they see no possibility of defeating the cuts and therefore see their role as, at best, organising token anti-cuts protests and attempting to ameliorate the worst effects of the cuts.

The only way forward is for local government trade unions to refuse to accept cuts and build for strike action against the cuts. Such action should be coordinated nationally. However, even council workers fighting in one authority can win victories.

At the start of this year Kirklees Unison, by threatening strike action, was able to force the council to retreat from compulsory redundancies and from reducing redundancy pay and some other measures.

This was not a complete victory – but the concessions were only won by threatening militant action and opposing all cuts. Contrast this fighting stance to the statement by the Manchester Unison branch, which in the face of devastation, does not say they will fight the cuts but only offers to: "assist members during this extremely difficult process!"

Alongside a mass campaign against the cuts, another crucial front in the battle will be the elections. Without a serious electoral challenge, there can be a danger that councillors carrying out cuts can remain impervious to the suffering they are causing. In this May's local elections we need the broadest possible anti-cuts challenge.

This is understood, for example, by Richard Taylor, who was elected in 2001 as an independent MP for Wyre Forest in defence of local hospital services. He has now raised that candidates should stand across the country this May in defence of the NHS.

We completely agree, but this should be linked to opposition to all cuts and have trade unionists at its centre. For this reason the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition will have an important role to play.

Councils of every shade announce job losses

Anti-cuts initiatives planned by new committee

THE NATIONAL Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) anti-cuts campaign is well and truly launched. The committee that was elected at the NSSN anti-cuts conference in January met on 2 February. The first meeting reviewed the conference and the challenges ahead for the anti-cuts movement and discussed some initiatives.

Rob Williams

The new committee comprises activists from the unions and the anti-cuts movement (see www.shopstewards.net for details).

Alex Gordon, president of the RMT transport union and Ben Sprung, London regional organiser of the FBU firefighters' union are members, alongside Dave Nellist, Coventry Socialist Party councillor.

Everyone agreed that the NSSN conference was a success. The serious debate on the way forward for the anti-cuts movement at the conference raised the bar in terms of the level of discussion

and its democratic character.

Since the conference it has become even clearer why we need to oppose all cuts as councils of every political shade start to announce job cuts.

The committee agreed to support the demonstration in Cardiff called by the local anti-cuts campaign Cardiff Against the Cuts on Saturday 5 March against both the Tories and Lib Dems who will be holding conferences in the city on the same day.

We also agreed to launch a national petition demanding that Labour councils refuse to pass on the Con-Dem cuts. This petition will be presented to the Labour local government conference, which is also being held on 5 March in London. We are looking to organise a march to, and lobby of, the conference to increase the pressure on Labour councillors to stand by their workforces and communities.

The meeting agreed to set up a website for the anti-cuts campaign which will complement the existing NSSN site and will carry details of anti-cuts events.

The committee is also writing to the various anti-cuts organisations, both locally and nationally, to call for a united struggle against all the cuts.

We will also write to the left unions in the Trade Union Coordinating Group, proposing an alternative platform of speakers at the TUC demonstration on 26 March so that the hundreds of thousands or more who should be there get to hear a fighting programme for the movement. Providing a clear way forward for the struggle will help to ensure that the march is a new impulse to the anti-cuts movement not its end.

The anti-cuts committee will be helping to build the maximum turnout for the demonstration. In the preparation for and on the demo itself, we will be calling for the unions to coordinate strike action to force the Con-Dems back.

The committee will be meeting regularly to review our anti-cuts work.

• The NSSN steering committee will be meeting on 20 February to start organising its national conference in the summer.



Unions on the NSSN lobby of TUC conference last September. photo Dave Beale