

We can stop the cuts!

Nobody, apart from the super-rich, can hope to avoid the impact of the government's brutal attacks. Across these two pages HANNAH SELL, Socialist Party deputy general secretary, sets out a strategy for defeating the Con-Dems' cuts.

Just some of the many services that would be affected by cuts: adult education, benefits for the disabled, bus services, CAB, children's services, coastguard services, domestic violence services, ESOL, EMA, fire services, flood

defences, help for rough sleepers, highways maintenance, hospitals, housing benefit, housing repair budgets, social rents, tuition fees, leisure centres, libraries, magistrates courts, museums, music teaching grants, national parks staffing, passport service, pest control, police budgets, public toilets, refugee council, school buildings, school crossing patrols, sheltered housing, street cleaning, swimming pools, theatres, waste collection, youth services. But they can be stopped!

If this government gets away with it, the clock of history will be unwound with levels of poverty returning to those of the 1930s. But it will not get away with it. This government is deluded if it imagines it will be able to carry out its programme without meeting an avalanche of opposition.

Before Christmas, we saw the magnificent student movement, the biggest for 25 years. The students inspired workers, but there are many who are not yet sure how cuts in jobs and services can be defeated.

Nonetheless, the majority oppose cuts. The latest opinion polls show that only 34% of people believe cut-backs are necessary. A huge demonstration on 26 March can be the start of a mighty movement that can defeat this government.

The government is trying to cow the working class by the sheer scale of its butchery. Two thirds of public sector bodies are reported to be shedding jobs. Every week a new slaughter of public services is announced.

'Plan B'

Yet, like the Wizard of Oz, behind the curtain of shock and awe, a very weak coalition government, trailing in the polls, is pulling the strings. Chancellor George Osborne's declaration that there is no 'plan B' has never been more than propaganda.

It is clear that the government has no choice but to have a plan B in reserve as the Financial Times editorial put it on 3 February: "Given the uncertainties, the government may have to adjust its plans in the light of events. To refuse to do so would be irrational."

In the face of mass outrage, the Tory/Liberal coalition has already



With the right strategy our movement can be successful photo Socialist Party

shown that it is capable of retreat. In one week in February it delayed the plans to privatise Britain's forests, continued the threatened funding of debt counsellors for a year, and demagogically warned universities against charging the £9,000 a year fees, introduced by the very same government just two months before.

These are not major retreats, but they give a glimpse of how scared the government is of potential opposition. Prime minister David Cameron has had to admit openly that: "It is not possible to make those cuts without cutting some things that are important. It will not make us popular. It will make

us unpopular. It will make me unpopular."

It already has! Some opinion polls now show Cameron as being as hated as Maggie Thatcher, the 'Iron Lady', was at her most unpopular.

The Con-Dems are far weaker than Thatcher's governments. Yet the Iron Lady was reduced to iron

filings by a mass movement of 18 million people refusing to pay the flat rate tax (poll tax) that her government had introduced.

That movement ended the tax and brought down Thatcher (see page 12). Today again, with the right strategy, our movement can be successful.

Oppose all cuts!

United we are strong, divided we will be defeated. The government knows that and is desperate to divide us – public sector from private sector, old from young, benefit claimants from everyone else, and so on.

To avoid the government's trap, and build a united movement, it is vital that we oppose ALL cuts in jobs and services.

If we fall into the trap of accepting pay cuts on the spurious grounds that they will stop a local library or swimming pool closing, or fighting to save one local hospital but not another, we will allow the anti-cuts movement to shatter into a thousand pieces.

Of course, we will not always succeed, but our starting point must be to fight every single cut. This includes cuts implemented

by Labour councils, who are willingly wielding the axes handed to them by the government. Across the country hundreds of local town or citywide anti-cuts campaigns have already been founded. They have organised numerous local demonstrations and lobbies of councils.

The 26 March demo will give the anti-cuts movement oxygen and confidence. This is an opportunity to further strengthen local campaigns which can bring together the different parts of the anti-cuts movement – trade unionists, young people fighting against university fees and education cuts, local residents fighting to save their libraries, swimming pools and so on.

Nationally, the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) – an organisation of militant trade unionists – launched an Anti-Cuts Campaign and is appealing to all local anti-cuts campaigns to get involved in its work.

See www.stopcuts.net

Organise, demonstrate, occupy! Step up the community campaigns

Most campaigns to save local services rightly start with petitions and meetings. To win, however, usually requires further action.

There have already been local examples of community campaigns succeeding, such as hospital campaigners in Redbridge, London, who, by demonstrating and campaigning, have forced the local trust to back off – at least for now – from closing their local A&E department.

There are the parents in Kirklees, Yorkshire, who stopped their children's school becoming an academy by organising a petition, but also by threatening to stand candidates for the council election and to picket the school if it became an Academy.

Across Europe all kinds of bold and innovative methods are being adopted by the anti-cuts movement. In Greece over a million people have refused to pay the motorway tolls, just getting out of their cars to push the barriers aside.

In Britain, students have used occupations as an important strand in the struggle against university fees. In Manchester swimming pool users

are already threatening to occupy their local pool to prevent it closing. Many similar campaigns will develop. Rent strikes will also be on the cards as housing benefit is cut and social housing rents increase.

A mighty struggle to defend the NHS is required. A movement of benefit claimants is urgently needed, as the vicious cuts literally drive those worst affected to despair. According to the Disability Alliance nearly one in ten of those claiming the threatened Disability Living Allowance say that losing the benefit may make "life not worth living".

Political alternative

One important strand of the campaign is to demand that councillors vote against cuts. Local anti-cuts campaigns should demand that Labour councillors, who vote for cuts, stand aside for those who are prepared to really defend jobs and services. If they don't stand aside – anti-cuts campaigns should stand against them, preferably as part of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (see page 13).

All of these movements and more

are essential and inevitable, but to maximise their effectiveness they need to be linked to building a mass movement against the cuts in general and in particular to the enormous potential power of the organised working class in the trade unions.

Strike action

Brendan Barber, general secretary of the trade union leadership body (TUC), has said that "the days of protests being solely about unions going on strike are over" and has welcomed "peaceful civil disobedience".

We agree, but only if community campaigns and civil disobedience are an addition to, rather than a replacement for, strike action.

When community campaigns and workers unite together, they can win big victories. One local example of that is in Renfrewshire, Scotland where 60 teaching jobs were to be cut. Over 1,000 local people demonstrated against the cuts and, given confidence by the size of the demo, 96% of teachers voted for strike action. The cuts were immediately withdrawn!



A massive national demonstration can give workers confidence that they are part of a powerful movement against cuts. photo Paul Mattsson

For a 24-hour public sector general strike!

In 2010 workers across southern Europe took generalised strike action in order to try to stop the savage cuts being inflicted on their living standards. Spain, Italy, Portugal, France and Greece have all seen mass strike movements. In Greece there have been eight general strikes over the last year.

Here in Britain we are facing attacks on a similar scale. In response the TUC congress last year agreed to support "coordinated strike action" against the cuts. The demo on 26 March needs to be the launch pad for such coordinated strike action, for a 24-hour public sector general strike.

A massive national demonstration can give workers confidence that they are not alone but are part of a powerful movement against cuts.

A public sector general strike, even a partial one, would do even more to raise confidence and prepare the ground for an all-out 24-hour general strike.

Even more than is the case in southern Europe, where general strikes are more frequent, it would terrify the Con-Dem government.

How can such a strike be organ-

ised? Every part of the public sector is affected by the cuts. In most cases strike action is going to be needed to stop cuts.

While local action and action by individual trade unions cannot be delayed until we get generalised strike action, there is no objective reason why trade union leaders cannot discuss together in order to set a date on which everyone plans to come out. This would be a significant step towards a 24-hour general strike.

Pensions

The attack on pensions is clearly an over-arching issue around which unions can coordinate strike action, although this does not preclude also coordinating action against other aspects of the cuts. The civil servants' union, PCS, is discussing balloting for action on pensions to take place in May or June.

The NUT and UCU are also discussing action before the summer. To have these three unions – one million workers – strike together over pensions would be an important step forward.

Mid-week demonstration

Unfortunately, however, the biggest public sector unions have not yet made any proposals to ballot on pensions. Some of them, at least, are arguing that no strike action should be organised before September, when the government finalises its attacks on pensions. But we should not wait.

Whenever the first public sector union takes national strike action there should be a national mid-week demonstration against cuts and attacks on pensions – so that workers from across the public sector can show their support for strike action. This could also increase the pressure on other public sector unions to build for a one-day public sector strike.

Such a strike should also appeal to those in the private sector to join who will be affected by the switch from Retail Prices Index (RPI) to Consumer Price Index (CPI), which doesn't include housing costs). This alone will mean pensions being cut by up to 25% over time, hitting round five million members of defined benefit pension schemes.

No to the anti-trade union laws

We have the most repressive anti-trade union laws in Europe, introduced by the last Tory government and maintained by New Labour. However, this is not enough for the Con-Dems, who dream of following the Republican Governor of Wisconsin, in the US, and attempting to completely destroy trade union rights.

But the US working class has responded with an enormous movement – of trade unionists and non-organised workers and students – in defence of workers' rights. On 12 March up to 200,000 marched in Madison, capital of Wisconsin, a state of less than six million people.

In Britain we have to be prepared for the likelihood that the courts would be used to sabotage such a strike by finding, for example, something spurious with one or more union's democratic ballot in order to try and stop everyone striking on the same day.

The government is terrified of the prospect of coordinated strike action over pensions, and it is preparing for battle – even setting up a 'war quango' to combat strike action. We must be equally determined. We need to build a movement so powerful that they think twice before using the anti-union laws and, if they do, the movement is strong enough to sweep them aside.

We are not in favour of taking unnecessary risks with the trade unions' resources and funds. However, such is the severity of the cuts that action is essential. The oil refinery constructions workers' strikes in 2009 and again at Saltend this year show that if a strike is powerful enough it is very difficult to use the anti-union laws against it. The battle for the right to organise effective trade unions, is an essential part of the struggle to stop the cuts. This must include the right of all workers to join trade unions and to go on strike, including the prison officers, who are currently denied the right to legally strike, and the police, who cannot even form a trade union.

The growing opposition to the cuts, as the reality of what they will entail bites, means that any strike against cuts could win enormous support from workers and young people.

In reality, if several public sector unions defied the anti-trade union laws, in the context of a public sector general strike, and with the other unions promising solidarity action in the case of any legal threats against them, the government would be powerless to stop them and, in the process, the anti-trade union laws would be broken asunder.

to defeat the cuts it will also mean campaigning to transform the unions into democratic and fighting bodies.

Find out more at shopstewards.net

This will mean campaigning to commit the trade union leaders to action, or if that proves impossible to replace them with leaders who will fight in their members' inter-

ests. Other demands that will form an important part of the struggle will be for unions to be democratically controlled by their members and for all full-time officials to be regularly elected and to receive a workers' wage.

The National Shop Stewards Network has an important role to play in bringing together militant trade unionists from different sectors in order to share experiences. It will also be necessary, however, to building fighting union lefts in every union.