

Coordinated strike action to defeat the cuts

"...every activist must be a leader in their own workplace and community..."

The big question arising from the tremendous TUC march last month is where does the movement go from here? JOHN MCINALLY, the national vice-president of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS), explains, in a personal capacity,

how strong determined trade union leadership and a clear strategy can defeat the Con-Dem coalition. He argues for a strategy that offers an alternative to the cuts programme and which is based on coordinated mass industrial action.

The government's strategy is clear. They intend to go in hard, fast and nasty; their principal aim is mass privatisation so their big business friends can cherry-pick which parts of the public sector they can squeeze every last drop of profit from.

The TUC march was billed as 'for the Alternative', but what is it? PCS, the left trade unions and the National Shop Stewards Network say no cuts or privatisation must mean precisely that. PCS's alternative is based on conference policy on tax justice, job creation and investment.

Between 500,000 and 700,000 people attended the demonstration on 26 March, a powerful show of strength. We are used to the police and the media underestimating the size of demonstrations but why did the TUC, who claimed there were only 250,000 to 500,000?

The TUC's dilemma comes from support for Labour. At the demo the message in Labour leader Ed Miliband's speech was: there is no alternative to the market and to the cuts and privatisation programme but Labour's cuts would be kinder.

Labour's strategy is to allow the coalition to carry out the cuts virtually unchallenged and hope the Tory and Lib Dems' deep unpopularity will ensure a Labour landslide at the next general election.

TUC failure

The TUC leadership's failure to adopt a clear no cuts strategy is because their unspoken strategy is that of the Labour Party. Even among some on the left there is a failure to call for an unequivocal no-cuts position because of a misplaced hope that not alienating Labour councillors and Labour affiliated unions will strengthen campaigns.

PCS supports demonstrations, peaceful direct action, building the anti-cuts movements in our communities and all other forms of campaigning. But the key to defeating the coalition is widespread, coordinated industrial action.

PCS has failed to receive satisfactory assurances from the Cabinet Office on its basic demands - no pay freezes, no attacks on pensions, the reversal of the indexing of pensions from Retail Prices Index to the Consumer Price Index, which devalues pensions by up to 20%, no job cuts and no further privatisation.

The assault on pensions is particularly pernicious. An agreement with the last government was reached in 2005 which meant pensions costs are not only sustainable and afford-



On the 26 March demonstration photo Senan

able but will actually fall in coming years. Any proposed increase will not go back into the pension scheme but straight to the Treasury to pay for the deficit, in other words the imposition of a pension "tax" on civil servants.

Pensions are deferred wages, low wages mean low pensions. If you remove the tiny percentage of high earners, the average pension of £4,200 is hardly a fortune.

The argument that public sector pensions must be cut because that is what has happened in the private sector is an argument for an equality of misery and a race to the bottom.

John Cridland, CBI big business group boss, recently said pension "reforms" were necessary to make privatisation affordable. But public sector pensions cost around £4.5 billion while tax relief for the richest 1% is £10 billion. It is little wonder PCS members are determined to fight this attack.

PCS has launched a major legal action to challenge the government's attempt to steal our accrued rights under the Civil Service Compensation Scheme and another to challenge the un-agreed re-indexing of our pensions. We will continue to target MPs of all parties to get our case across and continue to challenge the "no alternative to cuts" view that, although shifting,

still dominates the media.

We will continue to fight for tax justice and we support the protests by UK Uncut. We reject the increasing use of political policing to silence highly effective peaceful protest just because it is exposing fat-cat tax-dodging billionaires like Sir Philip Green.

PCS, long committed to fighting for the rights of unemployed workers, claimants and the disabled will not treat the attacks on welfare as simply an "industrial" issue. While defending its members' jobs and conditions, PCS will build on its already strong links with unemployed workers' groups and other organisations to challenge the coalition's attempt to hand over this vital area for corporate profiteering.

Effective action

PCS and others, including the NSSN, have argued consistently for effective industrial action that, in accordance with Congress policy, should be coordinated by the TUC. At this stage PCS is working with the education unions on defending pensions. If agreed by our conference in May, industrial action in June seems inevitable unless the government is prepared to negotiate. PCS will build for vibrant protests and regional demonstrations on the strike days.

While PCS argues that all unions should ballot at the same time and strike together we cannot wait on other union timetables when the attacks are happening now. However we would expect other unions to join us at a later stage in what is an unfolding battle. United strike action by PCS and the education unions would represent a major step forward in the battle to oppose the cuts.

United strike action can potentially stop the arrogant millionaire coalition. But real leadership and determination will be required across the movement and particularly by the TUC if we are to defeat the coalition.

PCS has signed individual cooperation agreements with Unison and Unite. Such agreements can and must be backed up by effective unity in action and campaigning.

Industrial action must also be accompanied by demonstrations and campaigning in our communities.

PCS believes the cuts must be fought wherever they occur. That is why the National Executive Committee (NEC) is urging departmental groups, branches and even individual workplaces to put in submissions for industrial action whenever and wherever necessary and not just wait for national action.

PCS will coordinate any action that arises from individual parts of the un-

ion. Already action is being planned or taking place in DWP, on call centre workers' rights, HMRC on unacceptable managing attendance procedures, Driving Standards Agency, the Home Office and elsewhere.

PCS's NEC meets on 12 April to finalise its plans to take forward the campaign to defend members' jobs, pay, conditions and services. The National Campaign Liaison Group will meet immediately following the NEC to hear and discuss the detailed strategy that will be taken to our conference in May.

Political leadership

Workers expect leadership from their unions, but political leadership will be demanded too. Labour cannot fulfil this role. While they almost certainly will make electoral advances, particularly in the short term, they can offer no alternative for workers. The question of effective political representation for working people has never been more relevant.

The political establishment has moved heaven and earth to create a consensus that there must be cuts. They know that if this lie is accepted by the leadership of the trade union and labour movement it will pave the road to division and defeat. PCS challenges this thinking.

The failure of the broad mass of the leaderships within our movement to even mention the word socialism, let alone argue for a socialist alternative is in itself a major obstacle to inspiring workers with the idea that a better way is possible.

The question of leadership is vital in this period, the message from the PCS leadership is that every activist must be a leader in their own workplace and community. Demonstrating effective leadership means speaking out for an unequivocal rejection of the idea that cuts are necessary and inevitable, for the alternative set out by the union and building effective action to defeat the cuts.

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PCS elections

The elections for the PCS national executive committee, including president and vice-presidents of the union, run from 14 April to 5 May. The Democracy Alliance leads the union now, an alliance which includes Left Unity, the left organisation which the Socialist Party supports.

This strong, campaigning leadership is standing for re-election and leaflets and posters are being circulated at the moment. For more information see: www.leftunity.org.uk