

The paper of the Socialist Party. Issue 672.

The Socialist, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD Registered as a newspaper at the Post Office. Published by Socialist Publications, printed by Newsfax International. ISSN 1366-9621

Weak and unpopular coalition can be defeated

When, on 26 March, over half a million took to the streets on a trade union demonstration against the cuts, Independent journalist Dominic Lawson sneered that more would be prepared to march in favour of the cuts. In the event at most a paltry 350 took to the streets to back the government's cuts.

As the unpopularity of the government's policies deepens and its supporters dwindle, the pressure is widening the splits in the Coalition. Tory MPs have even been describing their coalition partners as "yellow bastards" as they bicker over who will carry the odium of the hated Health and Social Care Bill. But despite the deepening tensions, the desire to cling to power is holding the Coalition together for now.

The government can be defeated but only if the anger shown on 26 March is harnessed around a clear fighting strategy. On 26 March the Socialist argued that, having marched together, now we need to strike together. We called for the next step to be a 24-hour public sector strike against the cuts and in defence of public sector pensions.

The first wave of coordinated strike action is now being prepared. It is an enormous step forward that the civil servants union, the PCS, voted almost unanimously, with only

two votes against, to ballot for strike action on these issues (see below).

The NUT did the same at its conference at Easter. The UCU is also planning further action. The postal workers union, the CWU, has just voted unanimously to call on the TUC to coordinate a 24-hour general strike. CWU members in London have also voted overwhelmingly for strike action against management bullying and in defence of jobs.

30 June strike

On 30 June up to a million workers will take part in strike action against the government's attack on pensions. Across the country strikers will take part in demonstrations and rallies. Those demonstrations should be an immense show of strength.

Those workers whose unions are not taking strike action should do all they can to show their support by demonstrating. School and college students should demonstrate together with their teachers and lecturers.

Successful action on 30 June will be an important springboard for further action. As Mark Serwotka, PCS general secretary, put it: "Three quarters of a million on 30 June needs to be turned into four million in the autumn". Members of those public sector unions which

are not yet planning strike action should organise a major campaign to demand their leaders act.

It is to be welcomed that Len McCluskey, general secretary of Unite, spoke at PCS conference. "We will build up to still broader action, if needs be, later in the year. To be absolutely clear, we will be balloting our members, coordinating our actions with yours and with other unions and building broad and effective community support to stop this government's agenda in its tracks." This now needs to be concretised.

Unison

The leadership of Unison is among the slowest to plan action to defend their members' interests. Socialists in Unison demand that their general secretary, Dave Prentis, immediately discusses with the general secretaries of those unions that are striking on 30 June to ensure Unison takes part in the second wave of coordinated strikes.

It is no coincidence that the unions building for strike action on 30 June are not affiliated to the Labour Party. On 26 March the unspoken strategy of many trade union leaders was to try and avoid further struggle, limiting themselves to 'march together today,

vote Labour together tomorrow'.

Many of the demonstrators did go and vote Labour in the local elections on 5 May in order to punish the government, but understood doing so was not a strategy to stop the cuts.

In the aftermath of the elections council workers are being forced to initiate strike action to try to stop cuts – whether against Tory cuts in Southampton or Labour cuts in Lambeth. Unfortunately, the Unison leadership seem more willing to sanction ballots for branches in Tory local authorities than in Labour ones.

For those workers losing their jobs, however, the colour of the axe being wielded makes no difference at all. As Labour leader Ed Miliband made clear when he spoke to the demonstration on 26 March, New Labour also supports massive cuts in public services.

Miliband has now said he stands for "a better capitalism". But it is a crisis of capitalism which is responsible for families in Britain facing the biggest cut in their living conditions since 1977 and it is the markets – capitalism – which are demanding public services are destroyed.

Alongside an industrial battle to stop the cuts, the trade union movement also needs to build a socialist, political alternative to the three major parties of big business.

PCS conference: developing strategies for struggle

John McNally

National vice-president of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS), personal capacity

PCS conference was genuinely historic. Delegates voted overwhelmingly to support the national executive's emergency motion calling for an industrial action ballot to oppose the government's attacks on jobs, pay, pensions and conditions. Only two out of a thousand voted 'no'!

A 'yes' vote will set the scene for a major strike on 30 June involving up to three quarters of a million public sector workers. This will be the first major shot in an unfolding campaign that can lead in the autumn to industrial action involving millions.

Conference also voted by a substantial majority to ballot members before next year's conference on whether or not they agree with the recommendation that PCS should, in certain limited circumstances, stand or support candidates in national elections.

Finally, conference was addressed by the general secretary of Unite, Len McCluskey, prior to the signing of a major cooperation agreement between the two unions.

Significant in themselves, together these developments show PCS is developing the type of strategies based on industrial and political campaigning that can unite unions and our communities in defiance of the Tory-led coalition.

The Con-Dems are intent on destroying the welfare state and the public sector while crushing any opposition in a 'race to the bottom'. This onslaught represents the greatest transfer of wealth and power from the overwhelming majority to the tiny political and business elite who are already awash with money and privilege.

PCS national president Janice Godrich and general secretary Mark Serwotka opened conference with analytical, fighting speeches setting



PCS members on strike in 2010 photo Paul Mattsson

out the nature of the crisis, caused not by hard-working committed public sector workers, but by the greed of bankers and big business.

In the debate on the emergency motion delegates explained how the cuts were impacting in their own areas. It became apparent that absolutely nowhere was exempt from job cuts, privatisation and attacks on conditions. Speeches reflected the genuine anger that is building on a daily basis against the madness of the cuts programme.

Mark explained that the current 'talks' on pensions reveal a government intent on unleashing a truly shocking assault. They want us to work until we are 68 years old and will take an axe to the value of pensions by slashing accrual rates.

Pensions, reflecting the low pay of civil servants, are not 'gold-plated'. The average for full service, taking away the very tiny percentage of high earners, is only £4,200 a year -

if the government succeeds in this attack then a working life of low pay will be followed by an impoverished old age.

Those union leaders, who believed it was possible to 'do a deal' with these Tory gangsters, are now in a real bind. Some even proposed a few concessions upfront to show willing. The scale of the attack is so brutal that they will have no option but to fight or accept complete, unconditional surrender.

Delegates knew the union couldn't hang on until the autumn because the cuts are already happening. There is now a real commitment to go back to workplaces and ensure the ballot is won. This vote is not just for a one-day strike, it represents the start of a campaign of industrial action capable of defeating the cuts.

PCS departmental groups are preparing for, or already have set out their own campaign strategies,

including industrial action in their own areas to fight the cuts. The national union will coordinate such action wherever possible within the union itself or with other unions taking action.

Most of all PCS will be working tirelessly to build the widest possible unity in action throughout the movement and intends to make 30 June a day where all can participate, whether on strike or not. The attack is not just on our workplaces but on our communities. Delegates stressed how important the work to build the anti-cuts alliances was.

Len McCluskey addressed conference and criticised union leaders who made excuses for avoiding organising action to fight against the cuts. He commented that the sheer scale of the assault on workers was so extensive that we must at the very least try to respond. He paid tribute to the BA strikers and argued that there was no alternative but to stand up to attacks.

A major agreement on cooperation was signed between the two unions which can lead to unity in action, a point made in Len McCluskey's speech when he pledged cooperation between Ministry of Defence Unite members and those in PCS.

Standing candidates

The yes vote to ballot members on whether or not to stand or support candidates in national elections in limited circumstances is genuinely ground breaking. The debate has been going on for the last four or more years in PCS and there have been two major consultations, a point reflected in the debate as there was no criticism of how the national union had carried out the process.

However, a number of issues that were answered during the second consultation were resurrected, ie would standing split the anti-BNP vote, or would it cost members more money to pursue this option, the an-

swer being no in both cases.

Delegates know through hard experience that there is a consensus among the major parties that there is no alternative to the market, the basis of the cuts and privatisation programme.

Expressing opposition to the motion was in some respects difficult because their real argument, "we must stick with Labour" was the argument that dare not speak its name due to the unremitting contempt in which the overwhelming mass of delegates hold the Labour Party.

Debate must continue on this issue and a strong campaign run to win the argument amongst members, although experience shows that when the idea of adding this invaluable weapon to our campaign armoury is raised they show agreement and enthusiasm.

An alternative vision

A major pamphlet Welfare: An Alternative Vision was launched at a packed fringe meeting which sets out the scale of the government attack on the most vulnerable in society and sets out a coherent policy to answer the barbarism of the market's solution – profiteering and privatisation.

The National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) fringe meeting drew over 80 people. Among the speakers was Chris Baugh, PCS assistant general secretary. Rob Williams, NSSN national chair, explained how the organisation is at the centre of the fight to build the maximum unity amongst trade unionists and community activists against the cuts.

Over 50 people heard Peter Taaffe, general secretary of the Socialist Party analyse the nature of the crisis and the necessity for a socialist alternative at the party's fringe meeting.

This conference sets the scene for a real fightback based on the only strategy that can succeed - widespread coordinated industrial action involving millions of workers.