

UCU facing battles on all fronts

Dave Beale

UCU, personal capacity

With its 2011 conference on 28-30 May, UCU - the trade union for lecturers, researchers and related staff - is being attacked from every angle by the government and the employers.

The UCU has national disputes and strike action on the agenda for: further education (FE) college pay; university pay; the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) pensions that cover pre-1992 universities; the Teachers' Pensions Scheme that covers post-1992 universities, FE colleges and schools; and the refusal of university employers to negotiate a national redundancy agreement.

In addition, there are numerous local disputes springing up over cuts, redundancies and closures.

The UCU also needs to engage in common pension struggles with other public sector unions.

Local government workers are being savaged throughout the country through massive redundancies, pay cuts or freezes, and/or dramatic changes to terms and conditions. NHS unions face yet more cuts and de facto privatisation.

Those unions prepared to fight back must also pressure the Trade Union Congress to coordinate action.

Last autumn the UCU higher education (HE) leadership suffered from a basic division over strategy. The compromise was to run strike ballots simultaneously on pensions, redundancy and pay - a somewhat bizarre decision strategically.

Some sections of the national

leadership quite rightly emphasised the importance of defending USS but showed utter timidity over calls for strike action.

Others pushed for strike action on pay and jobs, but failed to recognise the urgency of a strike ballot over USS before January 2011. The defence of USS is now much more difficult than it needed to be.

UCU can play an important role in defeating Hutton's pension proposals. The campaign to coordinate strikes over pensions on 30 June should be fully supported

However, UCU can play an important role in defeating Hutton's pension proposals that affect the Teachers' Pensions Scheme. The campaign to coordinate strike action over pensions between NUT, ATL, PCS and other public sector unions on 30 June should be fully supported by all sections of UCU, including those in the pre-1992 universities' USS scheme.

Even though no teaching or exams are likely to take place in the pre-1992 universities on 30 June, this section of the union should either take strike action on that day or participate in the picket lines and show support to all other striking unions.

Sheffield college lecturers strike



photo A Tice

Alistair Tice

Yorkshire Socialist Party

College lecturers in Sheffield, members of the University and College Union (UCU), have taken three days of strike action against threatened compulsory redundancies.

Sheffield College management wanted to make 120 full time staff redundant, including 60 lecturers. UCU members held a one-day strike in April and have now held a programme of rolling one-day strikes across the three college directorates: City, Hillsborough and Norton.

The director-general of Sheffield College, who gave herself a 14% pay rise last year (salary now over £140,000), says that job losses are necessary because of funding cuts.

But a branch official at Hillsborough told me that the college is also servicing £18 million in bank

loans as a result of a nearly 100% overspend on the new City college building. The directorate has got a nice new building but lecturers are paying for it in job losses!

The official also said that this is the eighth round of job losses since 1988, the number of lecturers being halved in that time, with the consequent cut in courses and teaching time for students.

And the scrapping of EMA, which 51% of Sheffield College students have been getting, mostly at the full rate of £30 a week, will impact massively on student numbers attending next year and lead to a further fall in funding.

30 to 40 lecturers supported the Hillsborough college picket line on 19 May, with around 20 at Norton college on 20 May.

Further planned strikes have been suspended while talks take place, but if they fail then the UCU will be back out on strike on 26-27 May.

Southampton action against council cuts

Nick Chaffey

Southampton Socialist Party

"No ifs, no buts, you can stick your Tory cuts!" and "Cut my pay, no way!" were the angry chants of Southampton refuse workers out on strike against savage cuts to pay.

It is clear that there is overwhelming support for the strike action as council workers struggle after a three-year pay freeze to cope with a 5% cut in pay.

"We have members claiming tax credits as wages are so low. Some here are going to lose £900. How are we going to pay our bills?"

Southampton's Tory council has hit the headlines with its vicious package of job cuts and imposed changes to pay. If council workers fail to sign new contracts they will be sacked in July.

Members of the unions Unison and Unite have voted in favour of strike action with selective strike action beginning today on 23 May and a city-wide work-to-rule and overtime ban.



photo Southampton SP

Refuse workers were out first, with other sections striking in following weeks.

Undoubtedly anger is fuelled by the chasm that separates the vast majority of council workers and the top council bosses on six figure salaries of over £200,000.

Unison and Unite members from Portsmouth joined the mass picket.

Workers know how much is at stake: "If they get away with this, they'll be back next year for more. Their plan is to privatise these services and to have us on the cheap."

We need to see everyone out at the council, all together, was the view of many, as well as support for national action.

The Socialist Party leaflet opposed all cuts in jobs, pay and services, and highlighted the council's £15 million reserves. This money could prevent immediate cuts. The leaflet also called for a city-wide demo to build support for council-wide strike action and for a 24-hour national general strike.

McNulty's railway report: not 'value for money'!

Steve Hedley

RMT London regional organiser

Sir Roy McNulty's railway 'value for money' report, commissioned by the government, seems to blame and penalise workers for the failed privatisation policies of successive Tory and Labour governments.

The disastrous privatisation of British Rail resulted in worse employment conditions and cost three times as much to run as the nationalised British Rail.

The subsequent public-private partnerships (PPPs) on London Underground, shamefully the brain child of the Labour Party, were

equally disastrous. Having pillaged the industry, private conglomerates Tubelines and Metronet fled when pickings weren't so rich, leaving the tax payer to pick up a bill of £billion.

It beggars belief that McNulty expects the commuter and worker to pay for the failed policies of private greed. More jobs cuts, worse services and still further cuts in safety will result unless unions and commuters unite to kick out the McNulty report and demand full renationalisation of the whole rail network under democratic public control.

The gauntlet has been thrown down; together we must pick it up and meet this challenge head on.

Teachers strike over bullying



Teachers at Selwyn primary school in Waltham Forest, north east London, took strike action on 24 May against bullying and harassment by the school's temporary head teacher photo M Reynolds

In brief

Newport Passport Office

On 23 May Tory immigration minister Damian Green announced the closure of Newport Passport Office as a processing centre. But, in a big concession to the massive campaign led by the PCS union in Newport, 150 of the 300 jobs have been retained.

The job losses were hardly a surprise to workers at the Passport Office - 36 boxes of redundancy leaflets had been discovered in their foyer! It was clear that the Tories had made their mind up about the office closure months ago.

Nevertheless the campaign has forced the government to make concessions. Of the 150 jobs retained at Newport, 50 will work in a customer service centre, while 100 will run a central Identity and Passport Service (IPS) customer complaints and correspondence base.

It will share telephone customer enquiries handling with the Durham office, while a counter-fraud team will operate in Newport. The PCS is determined to fight for all jobs. Workers are pleased with this partial success but sceptical at the government's promises.

It is still unclear where the promised jobs will come from and there have been no guarantees that the retained workers will keep their existing contracts. At least 150 jobs will be lost across the rest of the IPS.

A 'Yes' vote in the PCS ballot for strike action over cuts to pensions, jobs and pay later this month would give a green light to a strike across the IPS against all cuts.

Dave Reid

London Underground

London Underground (LU) train drivers in the RMT union plan to strike due to London Underground's refusal to reinstate tube driver Arwyn Thomas.

Eamonn Lynch, who was also sacked, has been reinstated following an employment tribunal. This tribunal showed that Eamonn was unfairly sacked for trade union activities. Arwyn's employment tribunal is taking place as the Socialist goes to press.

Arwyn told the Socialist: "The action is back on. The union suspended the action on the grounds of re-engaging Eamonn, and having negotiations about my reinstatement. They've now reneged on negotiations, and are still victimising reps, which is intolerable for the union."

If the employer fails to reinstate Arwyn, action will escalate to include LU station and engineering staff.

Blacklisting protest

After two years of harassment against blacklisted electrician Steve Acheson, Scottish & Southern Electricity (SSE) have backed down.

SSE threatened an injunction for trespass to stop Steve's peaceful picket outside Fiddlers Ferry power station near Widnes in Cheshire. This failed, as did their previous attempt using the Terrorism Act which was defeated in the Royal Court of Justice.

Unite activist Steve said: "It's not just for me, it's for shop stewards everywhere. If we stand our ground we can still defend our right to protest."

Steve's battle against blacklisting continues. For more information contact Steve on 07949 335390 or email warringtontuc@live.co.uk