

Birmingham: city of a thousand cuts

Tom Creek
Birmingham Socialist Party

Birmingham has been hit hard by the ongoing capitalist crisis. Unemployment stands at 11.6% and in some wards is over 20%. Once known as the city of a thousand trades, its manufacturing base is a shadow of its former self, and the city is also facing brutal public service cuts. In March, the council's ruling Con-Dem coalition slashed £212 million from its budget.

Over 7,000 council workers are being laid off over the next three years, and 5,000 more will see their jobs privatised. All those who remain have been threatened with redundancy unless they accept reduced terms and conditions. The latest cut to be announced is the 'offshoring' of up to 100 council IT jobs to India.

The Con-Dem coalition on the council is weak, and after gaining 14 seats in May, Labour expects to take control after the next round of elections in 2012. But Labour's 'alternative' budget proposed £199 million cuts to services – just £13 million less than the Con-Dems.

Opposition to the cuts is growing fast. A recent demonstration against



Birmingham council workers on a previous demo photo Jane James

the council's budget mobilised over a thousand people; over 60 coaches went from Birmingham to the TUC demo on 26 March; and local anti-cuts groups are springing up all over the city.

Most significantly, Unison has bowed to pressure from members and is balloting all Birmingham city council workers in the union

for industrial action. Activists hope to coordinate this with the national strikes by the PCS, NUT, UCU and ATL on 30 June. If this takes place, it will represent a partial public sector general strike in the city, which will be a huge step forward and can help give a lead in building for a national public sector general strike against the Con-Dem cuts.

University staff strike to save pensions

Alistair Tice

Hundreds of Sheffield University support and ancillary staff, members of Unison and Unite trade unions, took strike action on 3 June in a battle against the university's plans to slash their pension entitlements.

The strikers are low-paid cleaners, porters, secretarial, clerical and admin staff who stand to lose two thirds of their pensions if the university introduces a new scheme to replace the existing final salary pension scheme.

Approximately 2,000 staff, paid between £13,000 and £14,000 a year (70% are women), will see their pensions plummet from an average of half their salary after 40 years service to roughly one-eighth!

Unison regional organiser Phil Booth said: "Instead of the final salary scheme at 1/80th of salary per year worked, the university is proposing a cash balance scheme for its lower paid staff which would see them receive just 1/325th of final salary per year worked. It will devastate people's pensions and condemn our members to pension poverty."

Around 30 strikers joined early morning picket lines. Staff were indignant that in the 1990s the university took an eight-year pensions 'holiday' whilst staff continued their contributions, and that university vice-chancellor Keith Burnett who



On the early morning picket line photo Yorkshire SP

earns £294,000 a year, will continue to benefit from membership of the Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS) and its final salary pension provision.

They were also angry at the hypocrisy of a university that professes an ethos of 'equality, transparency and fairness' but has blatantly disregarded it for their lowest paid staff.

With an 84% vote for action in the ballot, workers will strike again on 10 June if management don't agree to bring the grades 1-5 into

the USS scheme.

• **There is a report of the recent UCU conference on the Socialist Party website www.socialistparty.org.uk. The conference made important decisions for joint action against cuts to jobs and pensions. It also resolved to defend working class people's access to further and higher education, including restoring the Education Maintenance Allowance and measures for people with English as a second language.**

Human rights service staff defend jobs

PCS members at the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) took their third period of strike action on 6 June against plans to close offices and cut jobs. The government, which plans to reduce funding by 60%, has been accused of aiming at the destruction of this important service.

Marie, a rep at the Cardiff office, explained that the cuts could mean leaving Wales with just eight workers to cover a population of four million,

no office in North Wales and severe reductions in the service provided to Welsh-speakers in particular.

"The government claims they're cutting red tape but in reality they're doing serious damage to the most vulnerable people," she said. EHRC workers battle for the rights of groups who have suffered discrimination and unfair treatment.

Topics of discussion on the picket line included the effects on children with disabilities in schools and how

the "reforms" of the benefit claim process will disqualify those in genuine need.

Jamie, another rep, remarked on the enthusiasm in the office for plans to strike together with other PCS members and other unions on 30 June. Cardiff Against The Cuts, the anti-cuts committee set up by Cardiff Trades Council met on 7 June to discuss plans for action on 30 June.

Ross Saunders

Demand for strike ballot in east London

Over 300 Unison members in Waltham Forest, east London, have voted unanimously to support a motion which includes the call for a consultative ballot on strike action to fight the cuts.

The meeting was the largest for years and had to be moved outside because the council chamber was too small to hold the meeting. Representatives from Unite, GMB and the NUT also spoke, calling for solidarity among all council workers to fight the cuts.

No wonder there is anger among council workers when the council is paying £20 million a year to consultants while some council workers are threatened with losing £5,000 a year. Speakers voiced

the disgust that many people feel towards Waltham Forest's Labour council who are only too prepared to push through these cuts.

Unison members also showed big support for the local anti cuts campaign. They queued up to sign the Waltham Forest Anti-Cuts Union join sheets. Leaflets for the National Shop Stewards Network conference on 11 June and for the Waltham Forest public meeting on 20 June in support of those unions taking strike action over pensions were snatched out of our hands.

The mood was summed up by one member who asked why "our union isn't taking action on 30 June?"

Chris Newby

CWU conference Unanimous call for 24-hour general strike

At the Communications Workers Union (CWU) conference at the end of May the scale of the attacks on postal and telecoms workers was put alongside the wider government attacks. Delegates called unanimously for a 24-hour general strike and on the CWU to participate in local anti-cuts bodies.

The postal conference, in three emergency motions, attempted 'to draw a line in the sand' to warn bosses and government over Royal Mail (RM) privatisation, pensions cuts and job losses.

Workers in three London Mail centres have voted overwhelmingly for industrial action. This dispute could begin soon and quickly become a national dispute as London will need the support of the rest of the CWU and other mail centres.

But confidence has fallen following the loss of the final salary pension scheme two years ago and the wave of closures and job losses following the Business Modernisation Agreement. It is vital that CWU members join together to challenge this attack.

Privatisation is back on the agenda and bosses are on the attack. They are seeking to 'embed' the union in the company before a private firm takes over. Emer-



Striking postal workers

gency motions to fight back were carried overwhelmingly or unanimously.

In the general conference delegates gave a rousing response to a speech from Lenny Shail of Coventry about how few Labour MPs had backed John McDonnell's trade union rights bill or opposed pension indexation changes from RPI to CPI.

But the issue of how the union strengthens its political representation remained unaddressed, other than a few unenthusiastic hopes that Labour may change. Therefore the dominant feeling was a recognition that the union will have to rely on its own industrial strength.

Dave Griffiths

Angry CWU telecoms members meet

CWU telecoms conference reflected the anger of members in the industry. Motions calling for changes to the attendance agreements that have been used to invoke the use of compulsory overtime were carried. Motions calling for pension increases to be linked to RPI and for changes to the 'parking at home' agreements, which are being used to force members to work extra hours, were also carried.

The misnamed Left Activists Network-led executive showed its real colours in opposing a motion calling for the pay settlement for next year to attempt to rectify the losses incurred by members in the recent three-year pay deal. This gave a glimpse of how divorced from the membership they have become.

Conference overwhelmingly supported a motion calling for a campaign of opposition, including industrial action, on the issue of performance management which is being used to 'manage' people out of the business. The executive opposed the motion once again demonstrating their failure to grasp what is happening in the workplaces.

Members were enthused by this victory and left the conference determined to ensure that the telecoms executive leads a national campaign against bullying.

New members who attended the conference for the first time were enthused by the democratic debates at the broad left (BL) meetings and new members were recruited to the BL.