



National Shop Stewards Network Conference 11 June 2011

Help unions realise their power

Linda Taaffe
Secretary, National Shop Stewards
Network (NSSN)

As seven workers from Honda Swindon were leaving the NSSN conference on Saturday 11 June, one car worker remarked: "I wish we could have brought a coachload!"

This was a typical reaction among the 350 workers attending the best conference NSSN has held so far. This regular event is rapidly becoming a feature in the calendar of the labour movement.

It was a solid working class trade union conference getting ready for the huge struggles ahead, aware of the difficulties but ready for the fight. Opening the conference, NSSN chair Rob Williams pointed out that we were meeting just 19 days before a real milestone - the 30 June joint strike of teachers and civil servants against the pensions robbery.

Martin Powell-Davies from the National Union of Teachers (NUT) national executive remarked: "The school hall we are meeting in is packed full today; on 30 June it will be totally empty."

Janice Godrich, president of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) declared that 30 June should not just be a protest strike but a day to light a spark that will give confidence to all other public sector unions to join in and swell the force to four million workers for more strikes in the autumn.

Mark Palfrey, London Communication Workers Union (CWU), said that although his union was not yet joining the action it would respect all picket lines and he and others would be doing what they can to get the union on board, especially now that mail privatisation and closures are on the cards again.

Union power

Alex Gordon, Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) president, reminded delegates about the biggest ever trade union demonstration that was held on 26 March, showing what the TUC can do when it lifts its little finger.

But he urged that this event should not be squandered. The correct conclusions about the way forward must be drawn. A general strike is needed. The £81 million of cuts so far are only year one of the Tory programme.

The NSSN will work with unions and anti-cuts campaigns everywhere to demand that councillors refuse to implement cuts. He noted that NSSN also provides a valuable space to discuss serious arguments on strategy, which are bound to become sharper.

Those who walked out of the NSSN in January after a democratic and open discussion on exactly this issue of strategy, have in fact left NSSN stronger and more active. (We understand a couple of those detractors snoopied into the conference hall simply to do a headcount!)

Conference gave a very warm reception to Les Woodward from GMB Remploy. In very colourful and bold language he described how disabled people are getting a kicking from the "Tory Taliban" with closures and cutbacks in Remploy factories and are in line for even more rubbish to be heaped on them.

But the thousands of disabled workers are ready to fight factory by factory, and he appealed to the "temporarily abled" for

solidarity. Conference agreed to support a motion to oppose closures of Remploy factories and to send protest postcards to Iain Duncan Smith MP.

But the conference was not all 'top table'. There was a whole range of marvellous contributions, both from trade unionists in leading positions and from rank and file workers struggling in the workplaces.

Every contribution was interesting and informative. 51% of workers in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) are on wages too low to be covered by the wage freeze.

Pensioners are gearing up for a fight to defend the welfare state. And Tony Mulhearn, one of the 'Liverpool 47' councillors who led a magnificent anti-cuts struggle in the 1980s, lambasted New Labour councillors today who use their re-election, not to fight cuts but to vote through cuts; who organise celebrations for dead working class heroes while denouncing living fighters who want to make a stand now. He praised NSSN for putting these councillors on the spot.

Find out more at:
shopstewards.net

The conference was practical too. At the six 'working lunch' regional get-togethers, delegates planned how NSSN in their areas could assist and build for 30 June and start planning for the NSSN lobby of the TUC in September, as a way of implementing the NSSN statement agreed in the morning session (see right).

'The Right to Strike' theme of the afternoon session was recognition that while we are preparing for mass action, the bosses are too. The representatives of the rich and powerful are ready to introduce even more draconian laws to restrict strikes. Boris Johnson and Vince Cable have made that absolutely clear.

But on the ground even now a raw battle is being waged. Individuals who stand up, get sacked. Frank Morris described his blacklisting from the Olympics site. Tube drivers Arwyn Thomas and Eamonn Lynch outlined how they were sacked for participating in legal industrial action. The RMT has backed them to the hilt, balloting every London Underground train driver for four days of strike action, due soon.

John Hancock from the Prison Officers Association (POA) national executive explained in a speech very complimentary of the NSSN, that POA is banned from striking, but that pressure is building up to break those restrictions, especially because of the drive for privatisation.

Paul Callanan of Youth Fight for Jobs (YFJ) described how youth and students suffered police kettling tactics during the student protests, but that with youth unemployment getting worse and university fees sky-rocketing, the best form of defence is attack. YFJ aims to bring together youth, students and trade unionists on a new Jarrow march in October.

And Keith Gibson, who spoke at the NSSN conference two years ago about the victory of construction workers at Lindsay Oil Refinery against all odds, gave us, in his bold inimitable style, a vivid account of a recent battle at Saltend, near Hull, where 400 construction workers were locked out.

Despite a willingness of the workforce



photos Senan

to fight, the battle was eventually lost, unfortunately leaving many questions being asked of some trade union officials.

This theme was taken up in the many contributions from the floor, including by Unite convenor Paddy Brennan, who appealed to NSSN for assistance with current problems at Honda, where some time ago a no-strike deal was struck between Unite union officials and management.

Kathy from Bromley Unison also took up the issue of victimisation by a trade union leadership, but this time, she said it was not all bad news. She had stood for the Unison national executive in the seat of her union colleague Glenn Kelly who has been suspended from holding office by the right-wing union leadership... and won! You can't keep down ideas whose time has come.

International solidarity

The problems we are all facing, ie the bosses and some labour leaders, are international. NSSN conference was asked to support a campaign by a group of stewards in the Lonmin Karee mine in South Africa. 9,000 were sacked but only 8,000 reinstated after stewards had challenged corruption between management and the leadership of South Africa's NUM.

Towards the end of the conference we were very happy to hear from our Greek brothers and sisters. Apostolis Kasimeris of the Union of Public Transport Workers in Attica, gave a great account of the effects of the terrible IMF austerity measures on

workers' living standards (see speech on page 9).

He described how the Greek workers are fighting back with actions like bus fare boycotts, but are being hamstrung by the cowardice of the union leadership who are hated by workers, and by the difficulties workers on the ground face in getting together to work out what to do after ten general strikes! Both he and his very able translator, Eleni, were given a well-deserved standing ovation.

Chris Baugh, PCS assistant general secretary, gave a rousing speech to close the conference, calling on all workers to make the 30 June action a resounding success (more on page one).

The NSSN, as pointed out in the officers' report to the conference, has gone from strength to strength over the last year. The newly-elected Steering Committee of 24 trade unionists with positions in most of the major unions will develop the work in conjunction with those in the regions.

The last year has seen the pace of events step up as the financial crisis deepens and the outline of the huge industrial struggles to come begins to take shape.

NSSN has increased its presence and will continue to develop a respected role in the labour movement. In the course of the conference John Hancock articulated similar ideas in his contribution: "Shop steward!" he said, "what wonderful words those are!" They conjure up days when the trade unions had real power.

We bear those words on our banner - and we intend to help our mighty unions realise that power again.



Tony Mulhearn, one of the 'Liverpool 47' councillors

The next steps in the fightback

This resolution was passed unanimously at the NSSN conference on 11 June.

This conference applauds the NSSN intervention on the TUC demonstration on 26 March. The NSSN produced 40,000 flyers, 1,500 placards and held an alternative stage - all calling for a public-private sector general strike to stop ALL cuts and defend pensions.

This NSSN conference salutes those unions - PCS, NUT, ATL and UCU - who are balloting their members to take strike action on 30 June in defence of public sector pensions.

About 800,000 workers could be on strike that day. We support the aim of union leaders like Mark Serwotka of PCS to "turn 800,000 taking action on 30 June into four million on strike later this year".

Therefore, we call on all NSSN supporters to offer maximum assistance to unions in the run-up to 30 June and on the day itself. This can include assisting in organising solidarity rallies and demonstrations where they have been organised; and to help initiate and organise them where they have not yet been proposed.

We urge NSSN supporters to reach out to those in public sector unions that have not started balloting yet and to move resolutions at all levels of these



unions calling on their leaderships to join in strike action to defend pensions later in the year.

NSSN conference also endorses the decision of NSSN Steering Committee

on 7 May to organise a march to, and lobby of the TUC Conference on Sunday 11 September to call on the TUC to coordinate strike action of public sector unions to defend public sector pensions.

Disabled workers getting organised

Just one month after the 'Hardest Hit' demonstration in London protested against the cuts, disabled workers met at the NSSN conference to discuss developing a clear response to these cuts.

Disabled workers are skilled workers. We want to exercise our right to work and the right to be supported to work through the taxes we pay to make our contribution to society. We don't want to be dependent on the patronising attitude of disabled 'charity' or pity.

The public sector cuts have a particular impact on disabled workers as the DWP and local authorities look for soft targets.

Disabled workers have been hit by cuts to Remploy, Access to Work, Disability Living Allowance and services provided by charities. Some local authorities are even charging for Blue Badges.

In the lunch-time meeting at NSSN conference, Les Woodward, GMB Convenor at Remploy, explained that the review of support for disabled workers led by Liz Sayce, chief executive of Radar, a disability campaign, represents a further threat as it recommends the closure of all Remploy factories. We believe that we should have a choice of segregated or integrated workplaces.

Disabled workers in the NSSN will be producing a response to the Sayce Review to be campaigned for in the trade union movement to ensure that we receive the support we need to be in employment and active in our unions.

David Maples



photo Alison Hill

Remploy workers, including GMB and NSSN activist Les Woodward joined a lobby in London when Liz Sayce of Radar launched her report on 'Employment Support for Disabled People' on 9 June. See shopstewards.net for a motion supporting the Remploy workers which conference passed unanimously.

John Hancock from the POA national executive said: "Shop steward!, what wonderful words those are!" They conjure up days when the trade unions had real power. The NSSN bears those words on our banner - and we intend to help our mighty unions realise that power again.