

Standing up to a weak government

John McNally

Vice-president PCS, personal capacity

The magnificent strike by PCS and education unions the NUT, ATL and UCU was a game-changer in the battle to defend public sector pensions.

The question on other public sector workers' lips was not 'why are they on strike?' but rather, 'why are we not on strike?' At demonstrations in every major town and city in the country Unison, Unite, FBU, GMB, CWU and many other union banners were there alongside those of the striking unions.

Community organisations, anti-cuts alliances and disability groups marched too, knowing the battle to defend pensions is inextricably linked to the defence of services and communities.

The government's attempt to divide private and public sector workers and state pensioners fell flat as speaker after speaker at rallies demanded fair pensions for all.

The worst elements of the millionaire press went into hysterical, almost comical overdrive with headlines calling on people to stand up to "union bullies", a claim rendered absurd by the almost festival good nature of the day.

The government suffered a major media disaster when multi-millionaire minister Francis Maude, was exposed on Radio 4's Today programme by PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka.

Maude was lying, claiming the cost of public sector pensions was rising when the absolute opposite is the case. His public humiliation was so bad he was pulled from doing any further interviews.



Teachers and civil servants together on the London demo on 30 June photo Paul Mattsson

The humiliation continued as the government moved from an admission that the strike was hitting hard to their infantile claim that it was a flop. In reality 85-95% of members were on strike.

In Scotland, where only PCS was on strike, support from other workers was tremendous. Over a thousand at the Glasgow rally heard a blistering speech from PCS president Janice Godrich exposing the grubby nature of those behind this attack - Francis Maude, who owns no less than four homes, was embroiled in the MPs' expenses scandal and, like the vast

majority of MPs, seems in no hurry to "reform" his own pension.

Workers are instinctively making the link between the pensions attack and the rest of the cuts programme. The real reason for the attack on pensions has nothing to do with affordability but, in the words of CBI spiv John Cridland the "reform" must take place in order to make outsourcing "affordable" - this fact must be repeated to every worker our movement can reach.

Ed Miliband's shameful attack on the strike was certainly treacherous but also mind-bogglingly stupid.

Rather than making himself "respectable" in the eyes of the press and big business he has alienated millions of workers by attacking an extremely popular strike.

In retrospect this major error may mark the beginning of a process which could result in Miliband actually losing the leadership of the party; not because Labour leaders will be worried about his treachery but rather because they will draw the conclusion they cannot be led into the next election by an incompetent who is clearly way out of his depth.

It appears that the government has recognised its error in attacking the entire public sector at once and will now try to divide the unions. Andrew Grice wrote in the Independent that: "Ministers have already shown flexibility amid fears that workers could pull out of the councils' pension scheme, causing its collapse. A settlement here might deter big unions such as Unite, Unison and the GMB from joining the coordinated strikes some unions seek in the autumn."

Mood for action

However, given the growing mood for action among public sector workers following 30 June, it will be very difficult for the leaders of Unison and the other local government unions to avoid taking action on the basis of the government throwing them a few crumbs. The message for trade unions and their leaders is clear: if we do not fight together we will be picked off separately.

Unless the government is prepared to move away from its hard-line stance on core issues like increased contributions, increased age and devaluation of pensions then we must build for widespread, coordinated action in the autumn.

Nothing will be the same after this strike; all elements of the political establishment, including even the so-called liberal "opinion-formers" are worried.

Having written off the unions as an irrelevancy the truth is staring them in the face; with effective determined leadership, linked to the preparedness to campaign, including taking industrial action, as a last resort, working people are more than capable of standing up to a weak government with no mandate.

Next time - strike together...

Susan Wills

Branch secretary University and College Union (UCU), Waltham Forest College

Thursday 30 June was a great day of action for UCU - on our second strike day this academic year.

At my own college, a lively picket line was maintained throughout the morning, with more UCU members taking part than ever before. We were joined by anti-cuts campaigners, local pensioners, union members and reps from other organisations - and received strong support from motorists and passers-by.

This refuted the media claim that 'the public' were not on-side in this battle.

A number of us joined the march in central London, along with our children, friends and colleagues, our union banners and home-made placards. Later on, a lucky few made it into the fantastic rally at Westminster Central Hall where the general secretaries of each of the four striking union leaders gave rousing speeches demanding fair pensions for all, and broadening out the issue into a wider defence of education and public services.

From the NUT and ATL, young newly-qualified teachers explained what the pension proposals would mean to them, whilst struggling to pay back student loans, and trying to afford moving into a place of their own. From UCU, two London reps gave two quite different perspectives on the post-16 sector. Mark Campbell's storming speech



Outside Waltham Forest College in East London photo Senan

expressed anger at the government attacks on higher education - with 70% of courses under threat at London Metropolitan University - while Annie Holder from Lewisham Adult Education service described the impact of the pension proposals on women and older workers.

The atmosphere of the day was

tremendous as speaker after speaker re-iterated the view that we all share - we will not accept this.

Earlier in the day, Unison support staff at my college told us that they should have been out on strike alongside us - next time they must be there, along with all the other public sector unions.

... we can win together

Martin Powell-Davies

NUT national executive

The streams of people turned to rivers, and the rivers turned into a flood as delegations of striking trade unionists from all four corners of London converged on Lincoln's Inn Fields for the demonstration against pension robbery on 30 June.

Both in London - and at the dozens of rallies across England and Wales - the unions jointly launched a Fair Pensions for All petition demanding that all workers and pensioners have dignity and decent living standards in retirement.

I was asked to speak at the overflow rally outside Central Hall to address the many marchers that could not make it inside the hall. Before I spoke, a Lewisham Unison member and teaching assistant explained that he had joined the rally today to show his support.

To cheers, he added that, in the

autumn, Unison and other school staff unions must all be on strike together. I asked the marchers to "look around and feel your strength".

"This government may have thought they were going to get away with their cuts but now they know that the trade unions are on the march. They tried to claim that 40% was a low turnout for a ballot - but teachers have voted with their feet today with 80-90% of schools closed or partially closed across London.

"The press try to claim we haven't got public support but the response from parents and drivers passing our picket lines has been excellent. People want to see someone standing up to this government's cuts at last - and that's what they see us doing today.

"In 2005-6 the threat of united action forced the last government to retreat over pensions attacks. We can do the same in 2011. If we strike together, then we can win together."

London trade unions public meeting - all welcome

TUC must organise a 24-hour public sector strike

Monday 18 July 6pm, Indian YMCA, 41 Fitzroy Square, W1T 6AQ

Called by the NSSN, RMT, FBU, PCS, CWU

Speakers:

- Chris Baugh assistant general secretary PCS
- Martin Powell-Davies NUT executive, personal capacity
- Steve Hedley RMT London organiser
- Mark Palfrey CWU London divisional rep
- Ben Sprung FBU London organiser