

Fighting pension cuts and the anti-union laws

Interview with Prison Officers Association (POA) assistant secretary

An important part of the action on 30 June was the well-attended lunchtime protest meetings held outside many prisons by the POA. Joe Simpson, POA assistant secretary, spoke to Alison Hill about the action and the POA's strategy.

POA members are extremely angry. Not just at the changes to our pensions but making us work longer, until we're 66.

Do you think there is a mood for further action?

Oh yes. We're in the process of balloting our members to see whether they want to take the appropriate action to defend their pension rights. [The ballot result will be announced on 20 July].

The union is facing privatisation as well isn't it, with Birmingham first on the list?

We're expecting another six to eight prisons to be earmarked for market testing within the next few weeks. Plus we're also dealing with prison closures. Three have closed already. And we're expecting an announcement soon about more closures.

How does the government justify that, in view of prison overcrowding?

They say that because the prison population is going down, which it is, that they can afford to close prisons. What we're arguing as a union is that they're not tackling the overcrowding issue. They keep saying that prisons should be decent and humane and we fully support that. But we say act upon what you're saying. Let's stop locking two or more prisoners up in cells that were built for one.

All they're interested in is reduc-



Joe Simpson photo Pete Mason

ing the amount of money they spend within the public sector prison service. So they have a dual strategy of cutting the public sector prisons and privatising as much as possible. We say if it's the state's responsibility to judge its citizens then surely it's the state's responsibility to rehabilitate them. But they're happy to give that to the private sector.

They say to the private companies - we're going to give you a lot of money to run this prison but we also want you to run a rehabilitation programme so prisoners don't come back. In effect what they're saying is - your contract could run for 25 years but if you're successful it could only run for five.

A private sector company is only in it to make profits for its share-



The meeting at Wormwood Scrubs (report below) photo Keith Dickinson

holders so where does rehabilitation and privatisation fit? We want to be part of the rehabilitation of offenders but leave us in the public sector, it is a public duty.

I understand the private sector company is threatening job cuts at Birmingham prison.

Yes, they've said there will be 123

job losses right across the prison. This could involve other unions like PCS, GMB and Unite.

This is big news. This is the coalition government's flagship on the criminal justice system. All of a sudden it's payment for results. If you rehabilitate an offender you rehabilitate him for life. So when is this private company going to get

paid - on the death of the offender if they haven't reoffended? It's a gimmick. What incentive would a private company give an offender to stay out of trouble? They make more money if they come back to prison.

You're talking about an average across the country of £40,000 to keep a prisoner in custody for a year. Which private company will turn that down if they can make a profit on it? It's easy money, especially if they can just lock people up all day.

Our fear as a union is that it will become like America. They're going to start warehousing prisoners. So where does Cameron's big society fit in?

The POA is balloting at the moment, what's the next step?

This coalition government and Labour as well are looking at strengthening the industrial relations and strike laws.

We're the guinea pigs. The rest of the trade union movement should take a long look at what we've gone through since 1994. As soon as we do a ballot with the word 'strike' in it we're off into the high court for an injunction. We've been told they will smash this union.

We'll be considering the ballot result and what the other unions do. We've already shown mutual solidarity. But if it comes down to it there'll be nothing to stop POA members taking the necessary action again. It will come to the stage of 'put up or shut up'.

Walkout at Wormwood Scrubs prison

Keith Dickinson
West London Socialist Party

Over 100 staff from all sections of the POA, including governors, walked out of Wormwood Scrubs Prison, West London, on 30 June for a lunchtime protest meeting.

All of them are affected by the pension cuts and are angry about the other cuts in their living standards. They also wanted to express their solidarity with those public sector workers in PCS, UCU, NUT

and ATL on strike against attacks on their pensions.

Alan Gourley, the chair of the POA in the prison conducted the meeting outside the gates. In a very good speech he clearly summed up the members' views, judging by his reception.

He said he couldn't imagine prison officers being able to do their job until they are 66.

At present there is provision for early retirement due to ill health but that can and has been violated by something called a Medical Ef-

iciency clause which is then used to get rid of workers on a much reduced allowance.

Presently they are faced with a government dictat not negotiations. It is not a strong government and has already been forced into u-turns.

"Our pressure can tell", Alan said. He hoped the Socialist could give their voice a hearing as none of the other press had shown an interest.

I also spoke, bringing greetings, solidarity and congratulations from the Socialist Party, West London branch and nationally.

Solidarity from POA

Alan Guest, Branch Chair of the POA at Send Prison, Woking, took the morning off work to support the pickets on 30 June. He sent a message of support, extracts are below:

"Prison Service staff are mainly made up of uniformed prison officers, however recently the POA learnt that the Ministry of Justice was ignoring a recommendation in the Hutton report that uniformed staff should retire no later than 60. This includes police, firefighters, military and other uniformed roles. But clearly those of us who look after, and keep society safe from the most dangerous people are not considered under this recommendation..."

"My latest pension statement says that after 38 year's service I will get a £9,000 annual pension, hardly the gold plated gravy train portrayed

by the government and Tory press, which has no doubt whipped up a generation of Daily Mail readers against us. My contract clearly states a retirement age of 60. How this government can say they will just legislate to change that is abysmal. If we breach our employment contracts the consequences are harsh. It's about time they realise that those contracts go both ways.

"Public sector workers must unite to defend our pensions and terms and conditions, local government workers and civil servants do not deserve to pay the price for the mistakes of rich bankers."

Successful NSSN meeting in Coventry

Following on from the inspiring national conference of the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN), supporters of the NSSN in Coventry called a meeting titled 'What next after 30 June?' on the evening of the strikes.

Despite many people having been on picket lines since 6am, there was a very good turnout of 26 people, with representation from Unite, Unison, GMB, PCS, FBU, NUT, UCU and CWU unions.

After short introductions from NUT anti-academy strike leader Jane Nellist and a general overview of the current situation from CWU branch secretary Judy Griffiths, there was a wide-ranging discussion with reports from the picket lines in the city and updates on how the cuts are going to affect us all.

The meeting provided an excellent forum for an exchange of experiences and ideas, and to discuss future tactics in the struggles ahead.

A number of unions have already committed funds to booking a coach to go to the lobby of the TUC called by the NSSN in September.

It was clear from members of the many unions attending this meeting, and the events of the day, that



Coventry teachers on 30 June photo Coventry SP

if the TUC organised a 24-hour public sector general strike it would be met with huge support from trade union members. The NSSN will do all in its power to help make this take place.

Paul Delaney



National Shop Stewards Network
Lobby the TUC
Sunday 11 September, London
For more details see www.shopstewards.net