

Workers can show their power in 30 November strike

Behind all the events being covered in the media at the moment, looms the massive 30 November strike (N30) to defend public sector pensions. Such is the potential size of N30 - up to three million workers, bigger than the first day of the 1926 general strike - that the phrase 'the elephant in the room' has never seemed so apt.

Certainly, the logistical effort alone being put in by the unions to ensure that the biggest post-al ballot in British industrial history takes place is mammoth.

The Socialist Party welcomes all the current and future protests that draw attention to the Con-Dems' cuts package and help build the opposition to it. We've played a key role in assisting the organisation of the Jarrow to London 'March for Jobs' which has grown into an important vehicle for opposing the attacks on young people.

The march has received huge support, particularly from trade union branches and members as it has made its way down the country. We appeal to all trade unionists, workers, young people and all who oppose the cuts to join the closing rally of this excellent march on 5 November. See page 12 for details.

Also, alongside the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) and Youth Fight for Jobs, the Socialist Party has given support to the 'Occupy London' protest camp outside St Paul's cathedral. We defend the right to protest and campaign and oppose moves to evict the demonstrators.

Workers' protest

Two weeks ago, some of the protesting construction electricians staged an impromptu march from their Blackfriars protest to St Paul's, instinctively realising the need for solidarity with those opposing the naked rule of the bankers. The electricians' rank-and-file committee is looking to coordinate its national demonstration on 9 November with that of the students on the same day.

Our message in all these events has been consistent. The organised working class is potentially the most powerful force in society. All those fighting the cuts should come in behind the unions taking strike action on 30 November. We call for mass demonstrations to be organised in every city and major town to provide a means by which those not in the striking unions can show their support for the action and opposition to the cuts.

The prospect of hundreds of thousands of union members on the march will be a powerful pole of attraction to all those opposed to the



Marching during the 30 June joint strike photo Paul Mattsson

cuts and also to the many victims of Cameron, Clegg and Osborne's vicious assault on our class and particularly the most vulnerable sections of society.

The public support for the Southampton council strike has been consistently over 70% because those on the receiving end of the cuts, the vast majority in society, have been delighted to see at least someone fighting for them.

This is particularly the case as there is a cross-party parliamentary consensus that the cuts are necessary, even if New Labour thinks they are 'too far too fast'!

While Labour leader Ed Miliband opposes the strike a poll by the Metro free paper found that 68% of Labour supporters are in favour of the strike. This shows how big the groundswell can be on and after N30 when the potential power of the unions is shown to everyone in society.

It is this force of the organised working class that is the main threat to the best-laid plans of the Con-Dems and those in Tory, Lib Dem and Labour led councils who swing the cuts axe. However, to be fully effective N30 must be part of a fighting strategy and not just a 'parade'.

No doubt, the likes of TUC leader Barber and Unison general secretary Prentis have an 'acceptable' deal in mind which they may hope can delay the N30 strike or make it a one-off. The Unison leaders may be hoping that a big vote for strike action in the ballot which ends this week can force the government to give concessions or just promise 'meaningful' talks to justify pulling

out of N30.

We don't take lightly the dilemmas facing the unions, such as with the FBU firefighters' union that has concluded that there is enough on the table not to ballot. We think that the FBU should join the action (see 'The 30 November strike and the Fire Brigades Union' on www.socialistparty.org.uk) but agree with them that the decision of the TUC and others to begin scheme specific talks has confused the situation and potentially weakened attempts to create a united front.

However, a strike of millions of workers terrifies the right-wing union leaders, precisely because it threatens their control over this great dispute. The reality of millions on strike, with picket lines, rallies and demonstrations in every town and city can bring home to workers how powerful they are when they act collectively.

It is then far more difficult for the leaders to argue that given the impact, the action must stop or that the next course of action must be to step it down to regional, local or selective strikes.

The Socialist Party is flexible on the tactics needed to take the struggle forward (see pages 6 and 7). But for us, in order to avoid the mood to fight dissipating, any other action must be to supplement continued coordinated national action.

We welcome any discussion on the precise nature of this escalation, for example, whether there should be a 48-hour strike to follow N30 or another 24-hour stoppage. But the principle has to be of maintaining and extending the united front of unions acting together on a national basis.

Fast news

Support Vik Chechi

As we reported in the last issue, Vik Chechi, Unison branch secretary at Queen Mary university in east London has been suspended from work. Many Unison members believe this is part of the university's drive to implement swingeing cuts.

A Unison branch meeting on 28 October resolved to give full support to Vik. But messages of protest and demands for his reinstatement should still be sent to: c.pearson@qmul.ac.uk and f.balkwill@qmul.ac.uk. Please send copies to info@shopstewards.net

Job Centres

At a time of rapidly rising unemployment, the government has announced plans to close 19 jobcentres nationwide. This is on top of the closure of 22 benefit processing offices, where 350 people are threatened with compulsory redundancy as they have not been found alternative employment. Civil service union PCS has condemned the closures and is lobbying parliament on 2 November. Jobcentre Plus has slashed 12,000 jobs since January, when the government was claiming that unemployment would fall.

Capita strike

TV licensing workers were on strike again on 31 October over pay. The 500 workers, outsourced to Capita, mounted picket lines in Bristol and Darwen, Lancs. Capita makes £1 million in profit every day yet they have only offered a 2.6% pay rise. Now they are refusing to let workers who go on strike do overtime and are offering strike-breakers a free lunch.

The mood of the CWU members is good though - having rejected the original pay offer by 88% in a ballot.

Bombardier

Over 50,000 signatures and a demonstration of 10,000 in July showed the disgust of Derby workers about the government's decision to award a £1.4 billion contract to build trains for Thameslink to Siemens.

Derby faces 1,400 redundancies and tens of thousands more at suppliers across the country. The Tories are abandoning 150 years of train-making in the city and the last design team left in Britain. As David Cameron promises an "all-out mission" on major infrastructure schemes the Derbyshire Rail Forum is charging £250 a head for tickets to its conference on 3 November.

Protesters from the unions, workers from Bombardier and others will oppose Tory rail minister Theresa Villiers sneaking into Derby Conference Centre.

The TUC unanimously supported the RMT/Unite's resolution on Bombardier's nationalisation should the multinational pull out, but workers are being made redundant every week. Socialists argue in the support group and campaign for occupation whilst the Litchurch Lane plant is still a going concern. We campaign for democratic planning and control.

British Aerospace is also facing massive redundancies. A united industry campaign could swing an autumn of street occupations and marches into the Tories' "winter of discontent".

Graham Lewis
Erewash trades council

Low-paid train cleaners make a stand

Hugh Caffrey

Cleaners working on trains on the Virgin West Coast Mainline struck for 24 hours on 28 October in a row over poverty pay and union rights between the 'Carlisle Cleaning and Support Services' contractor, and the RMT union.

Carlisle's owner, Impellam Group, part of the business empire of top Tory Lord Ashcroft, has increased its profits by almost 30% to £16.2 million in the past year off the backs of its low paid workforce. Yet it is telling cleaners they need to take a real-terms pay cut for it to keep the contract with Virgin.

The entire rail industry should be renationalised and employ all workers directly, putting an end to this maze of contractors and subcontractors grubbing their profits at the expense of workers and the travelling public.

Pickets at the rail depot in east Manchester told me about "sweatshop" conditions for cleaners paid a flat rate of £6.54 an hour, even when on permanent night shifts, even when working in sub-zero winter temperatures.



For a people's railway photo Paul Mattsson

RMT official Andy Warnock-Smith said: "These cleaners are on appalling wages and conditions, and they're being treated with absolute contempt by the company.

"Something else about this dispute is how Virgin Trains are just sitting back. Branson has this image as a 'great entrepreneur', but what's he doing to resolve this?"

Carlisle had offered a miserable 1% pay 'rise' this year, 'worth' 6p an hour. As one picket pointed out, that's £2.40 a week: a pint of milk and a loaf of bread!

Carlisle also offered 1% next year, 'worth' 7p. When inflation is officially around 5% and in reality far higher for workers, this is a big pay cut.

Under pressure, Carlisle made a new offer, described by pickets as so "minuscule" that the union rejected it out of hand.

RMT membership at Carlisle has doubled to represent the overwhelming majority of the workers, 94% voted to take strike action in the RMT ballot.

RMT members on the contract will also refuse to empty train effluent tanks or refill fresh water tanks for 24 hours from 6pm on 4 November.

Liverpool

Around 25 Carlisle Contact Cleaners and support staff were on strike on 27 October at the Liverpool Edgehill depot. These cleaners work on the West Coast main line, mostly on permanent nights cleaning Virgin Trains.

They have been offered a paltry 1% pay increase for this year and the Carlisle group are attempting to derecognise the RMT union. The action was supported by Liverpool trades council and Liverpool Against the Cuts.

John Marston