

30 November and beyond

Building a co-ordinated strategy for strike action against the Con-Dem cuts

The joint strike against the Con-Dem attacks on pension rights on 30 November could be one of the biggest strikes in modern trade union history. It is likely to involve more workers than even the 1926 general strike. But now is the time to consider what should happen after the strike – how to build for further action if necessary. John McNally, the national vice-president of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) writes, in a personal capacity, about the PCS plans for 30 November and the battles to come.

The leadership of PCS viewed the attack on pension rights as the issue on which an effective fight-back against vicious government cuts could be launched. This would be by building a wide alliance of trade unions capable of organising and delivering widespread, coordinated, industrial action.

This year's TUC saw over 20 unions come together in a commitment to coordinated industrial action with a one-day strike on 30 November. Some unions are now balloting; others like PCS have already done so.

If no concessions are made by the government then the action will involve upwards of three million workers and will be, as Unite general secretary Len McCluskey pointed out, a public sector "general strike". It will involve more workers than were involved at the height of the 1926 general strike.

The impact of coordinated action on this scale will be profound: it needs to be, because if the gangsters and spivs currently in government win on pensions they will be emboldened to attempt greater outrages.

The success of the campaign will be determined in large part by formulating a correct industrial action strategy. The starting point is the position the trade union movement has towards the cuts and privatisation programme. PCS is unequivocal, cuts are neither necessary nor inevitable. The union's policy is to argue for an alternative based on tax justice, investment and job creation, the nationalisation of the banks, a house-building programme and the creation of a million 'climate' jobs.

The cuts programme is the most serious assault on living standards since the 1920s. PCS rejected the consensus the government attempted to establish that there was no alternative to the cuts.

Labour Party

But this consensus was only possible because the Labour Party also argued cuts were needed. Labour proposed cuts of a similar level but to be carried out less quickly. This policy is reflected by some trade union leaders who say that the cuts are being carried out "too deeply and too quickly" rather than fighting against them being carried out at all.

PCS's policy has been that if we organise in our workplaces and communities and build the greatest possible anti-cuts alliance in society the government can be defeated. Critical to the defeat of the cuts programme was the necessity to build a strong alliance among the public sector trade unions in order to organise widespread, coordinated industrial action.

PCS balloted on the pensions issue but also on job protection, pay and privatisation as industrial action may need to be taken on a variety of issues, all linked to attacks on our members and the services they provide.

PCS believes all the cuts should be opposed, no job losses, pay freezes nor cuts in terms and conditions. Accepting cuts is saying "don't cut my job, cut his or hers". The true savagery of the cuts programme goes beyond attacks on workers' jobs and conditions. The cuts in welfare and social provision will devastate the lives of individuals, families and communities.

The three key elements in the battle over pensions are the Con-Dem coalition's attempt to make public sector



Marching in Newcastle to defend pensions photo Elaine Brunskill

workers pay more, work longer and get less despite the fact public sector pensions are affordable, sustainable and reducing in cost. The attack is ideological and based on the demand from big business to cut workers' conditions in order to make the privatisation of our services "affordable".

Up to six million private sector workers had their pensions stolen from them over the past 30 years or so. While private sector pensions are broadly comparable with public sector pensions, although the figures are undoubtedly skewed by the obscene pension payouts for many company directors and so on, the real issue in the private sector is about provision. The slogan and campaign of Fair Pensions For All must be an integral part of the TUC strategy.

In negotiations PCS took the correct approach. There must be agreement on the three core issues before moving to sector negotiations, a view not shared by some other unions. Sector negotiations took place but did not produce the concessions some unions hoped for, that was why the alliance for strike action came together.

It is not "business as usual". That is the message PCS's leadership has stressed to activists who are responding in a disciplined and committed fashion by focussing all energies on building for the maximum turnout and impact for 30 November.

The industrial action will be supplemented by protest and campaign activity in our communities, through anti-cuts alliances, by students, pensioners and others who will see this as an unparalleled opportunity to send a clear message to Cameron and Clegg to stop their attacks on jobs, conditions, services and communities.

The Labour Party will be under the microscope. The Labour Party's position on

cult to evade the issue of escalation.

The task must be to ensure any escalation is commensurate with the task – defeating the attack on pensions, which would be a major, even critical step, in the wider war to stop the coalition's cuts.

Widespread, coordinated national action involving as many unions as possible is the key to applying enough pressure to bring the government into meaningful negotiations. All efforts should be made to increase the number of trade unions and members participating in any further action, including potentially private sector workers, where disputes exist or potentially exist, under the banner of Fair Pensions For All.

While all forms of industrial action must be seriously considered, that discussion must start with coordinated national action. There is a tight timetable on pensions as the government intends to have its proposals in place by spring 2012.

The impact of the action on 30 November will be huge. Maximum pressure can be applied by making a clear statement that further national action of two or even three-day nationally coordinated strikes will follow month on month until there are serious negotiations. The nature and scale of the current struggle means it could not be ruled out that, given a clear lead from the TUC and union leaders, workers would be prepared to take four, or even five days of coordinated national action.

Linking the struggle

Such escalation would be a very serious matter and would mean a mobilisation of our movement on an unprecedented scale, linking the struggle not just between workplaces but into our communities and among pensioners, students etc. The message to the coalition would be clear – enough is enough, back off now or face the consequences.

National coordinated industrial action, effectively a public sector general strike, can defeat the pensions attack and would fundamentally shift the balance of forces in society. That is precisely why some in the leadership of our movement will resist developing such a strategy, as they see no real alternative to the profit system and so do not want to seriously challenge it.

PCS has called for an overtime ban from 1-31 December and the action will be reviewed thereafter. Wherever such action in the public sector is effective and appropriate, it should be implemented.

PCS has asked all departmental groups to produce a plan setting out the key issues affecting members in order to present departmental managements with a set of demands. If these demands are not addressed then the resulting campaigns, including industrial action, will be closely coordinated by the national union and, whenever possible, other unions.

There is no easy road to winning on pensions but an effective strategy and committed leadership can succeed. The government has been in crisis since it took office and is deeply unpopular. The organised strength of the trade union movement as expressed through widespread coordinated industrial action, supplemented by other forms of action is more than up to the job of stopping the cuts.

Tactics for industrial action

A debate is beginning on the tactics of selective and targeted action. In PCS these terms, which are inter-changeable, have specific meanings. Targeted action is bringing out groups of workers involved in group or national disputes for a limited duration. Selective action is defined as choosing a "key" group of workers who then get strike pay, including full wage equivalent, on behalf of all other workers in dispute. Both types of action should be coordinated.

Targeted action is when there is a direct industrial dispute, which may be on an issue that directly relates to the national or specific group issue. For example it could be about the issue of local job losses, something that would clearly fit in with the national policy but affecting workers in a particular location. This type of action opens up considerable opportunity for coordination within a particular union or groups of unions.

The use of selective action is viewed with deep scepticism by PCS activists due to their experience going back decades. However, the type of selective action being discussed in other unions including Unite, which results from this method of action being recently used by local authority workers in Southampton, would be of short, sharp duration, perhaps rotating groups of workers in action, unlike the very long disputes characteristic in civil service history.

Impact of action

But the idea that a key group of workers exists whose role is so vital that they can take action on behalf of all others because their industrial impact will be so strong is problematic. Industrial impact depends on the industry itself. Clearly workers who have the power, for example, to literally turn off the lights have enormous and immediate, industrial power.

The vast bulk of public sector workers do not have that type of industrial power and the impact of industrial action is, generally speaking, cumulative. However there tends to be a sharper political element to public sector strikes because the government and local authorities are the employers and also such workers deliver public or local services in which people feel they have a direct interest.

Selective action was used in the civil service in the 1981 26-week civil service pay dispute. Key workers in VAT and tax took all-out strike action based on lost wages being covered by 85% strike pay.

The strike was unsuccessful despite the action by these workers having a considerable financial impact on government finances. But the government rode this out because of their wider class interest of winning the dispute.

The experience of long-term selec-



NUT members in action on 30 June photo Paul Mattsson

tion in disputes like the Employment Service Health and Safety dispute and the Pathfinder dispute in the 1990s and 2000s illustrate the problems with this type of action: selective strikers can become isolated, strike pay at what is effectively full-wage equivalent drains union finances and encourages the employer to sit it out. But most of all, other union members felt removed from the dispute, reduced almost to bystander status.

PCS activists should however apply a degree of caution before transposing their experiences onto the current discussion without taking into account the potential impact of such short scale selective action in the context of wider industrial action strategies.

However, one simple principle must apply, all strategies should be properly considered but if the battle is to be won the role of widespread, coordinated industrial action must be paramount. Other forms of action will play important, in certain circumstances, even critical roles. But national action, the best method of generalising and optimising impact, is the key.

Rolling action has been discussed, particularly by the NUT teaching union. This is a tactic also viewed with scepticism in PCS. In the 1987-88 pay campaign this tactic was not a successful experience.

Nevertheless such a tactic can make sense in terms of the education system where targeted action could be misrepresented as making some areas bear the whole burden of action, risking a loss of public support in affected areas. And it also means all members would eventually be involved in the action.

Under the over-arching strategy of national action, different tactics can be effective but must be coordinated for maximum impact.

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PCS picket line in Yorkshire photo Iain Dalton