

Defend the right to strike and protest

As head teachers and senior civil servants vote overwhelmingly to join the ranks of strikers on 30 November, the Con-Dem government is quailing. Twenty eight unions are now expected to join the strike against the attacks on public sector pensions, which will be up to three million workers strong. This strike will be a powerful demonstration of the massive potential power of the working class to stop the cuts and bring down the hated government.

Francis Maude, negotiator for the government, has made an 'offer' to the unions of the 'right' to take a token 15-minute strike on 30 November "without loss of pay" in order to keep the strike ballots live while "negotiations continue".

Brian Strutton, national officer of the GMB union, responded: "Maude's proposal for a 15-minute strike is a daft idea. We are asking members to vote for a strike not a tea break."

The Financial Times described Maude as wearing "a kid glove on one hand and a knuckle duster on the other". In reality the government has knuckle dusters on both hands but this 'offer' shows how desperate it is to divide and weaken the strike movement. It is a frantic ploy to try and stop unions with more right-wing leaderships from participating in the strike.

Maude combined it with an unctuous description of Dave Prentis, general secretary of public service union Unison, "as a formidable, skilled, experienced negotiator". Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS civil service union, was meanwhile dismissed by Maude as 'unwilling to engage' with the government's 'concessions' on the pensions deal.

In reality, the so-called 'concessions' which Lib Dem treasury secretary Danny Alexander announced to the press, were no more than a press stunt designed to undermine the strike. Even if the 'concessions' were concretised they would still mean public sector workers being forced to work longer, to pay more into their pension funds and to get less pension when they are finally allowed to retire.

It is the threat of the biggest single day of strike action since 1926 which is forcing the government to even talk about concessions. To force them to really retreat it is essential that the strike on 30 November goes ahead.

Despite Maude's warm words, Prentis has rejected the proposal for a 15-minute token strike saying correctly that: "Our members are not employed by Francis Maude but by 9,491 separate employers." However, this avoids the central point. Unison's Service Group Executives have voted to go ahead with a 24-hour strike, not a 15-minute tea break, because the government is still attacking their members' pension rights.

Even if the 'concessions' were concretised they would still mean public sector workers being forced to work longer, to pay more into their pension funds and to get less pension when they are finally allowed to retire

In addition, unfortunately in some areas local health Unison branches had already reached deals with their employers for lunch-time rallies rather than a day of strike action. This is not what Unison members voted for. If the government is to be forced to retreat 30 November needs to be a mass strike with mass participation.

Mass pickets and rallies in every town and city should be built for, involving strikers but also reaching out to young people, pensioners and the unemployed. This also shows the need for trade union members to have democratic control of the negotiations at every stage.

This must be combined with a serious plan to escalate the action unless the government retreats. This can and should include local and regional action. The Unison leadership has been refusing to sanction a number of local strike ballots against cuts - instead arguing all actions should be rolled into 30 November.

The Socialist Party does not support this approach; local strikes against cuts are an essential part of the struggle. Nonetheless, national coordinated strike action is key to forcing the

government to retreat. If it does not, it is essential that a date is set for further general strike action - of 24 or 48 hours depending on the mood - soon after 30 November. This should involve the whole public sector, but also look to call out the private sector.

The PCS is calling for a meeting of all the striking public sector unions to be convened as soon as possible after the 30 November strike to discuss how to build further coordinated strike action.

Maude showed the government's true colours when he threatened to add to Britain's anti-trade union laws, already the most repressive in Europe. Maude hinted at introducing a 50% turnout rule before strike ballots would be valid, as has been demanded by Tory London mayor Boris Johnson. Maude conveniently didn't mention that the Tories are in office, carrying out a brutal assault on public services, with only 26% of eligible voters voting for them.

And as the 30 June strike showed, where there was more than 80% participation in the strike, far higher than the turnout in the ballot, there is no direct correlation between the numbers who send off their ballot paper, and the numbers who support a strike. The PCS has correctly raised, as part of a campaign against the anti-trade union laws, measures to make it easier for trade union members to vote in strike ballots, including electronic and workplace voting.

Solidarity

Any threat to strengthen Britain's anti-trade union laws must be met with a mass campaign of the whole labour movement, including if necessary of strike action. The Tories have already given an indication, on the streets of London, of how they can be prepared to use the mailed fist against workers' struggles. On 9 November thousands of students protested against fees and education cuts. They had massive public support from the workers who stood on the pavements and cheered it as it went past, with building workers raising their hard hats in the air to show support.

An overwhelming 4,000 police surrounded the demonstration which was, in reality, a

moving kettle. Horses, dogs and vans were deployed to intimidate the students. Several students saw evidence of the police using agent provocateurs, wearing the 'V for Vendetta Guy Fawkes' masks which have become popular on demonstrations, in order to try and provoke the demonstration and give the riot police the excuse to attack. Despite this the demonstration remained peaceful. This shows the need for well-organised, democratically controlled stewarding of demonstrations. This applies not only to the student movement but also to workers' demonstrations. As we have warned that the tactics used against the student movement will later be used against workers' struggles.

This was shown on Wednesday 9 November. Electricians, demonstrating against huge pay cuts, tried to link up with the student demonstration. The police kettled them, the first time this tactic has been used against a workers' protest. The student demonstration, reflecting its desire to link up with workers' struggles, stopped for 15 minutes at the initiative of Youth Fight for Jobs, and demanded that the electricians be released and chanting "students and workers, unite and fight".

The battle to stop attacks on pensions and cuts in public services cannot be separated from the defence of workers' democratic rights. The trade union movement needs to emblazon the defence of democratic rights on its banner and put it at the heart of struggle. We have to defend the right to strike - including repeal of the anti-trade union laws and the restoration of the right to strike for the POA prison officers' union and others - alongside the right to demonstrate, to protest and to occupy.

The government is correct, from its point of view, to attempt to derail the strike action planned for N30. Participation in this mass action will begin to reveal the enormous potential power of the working class when organised and with a determined leadership.

The Con-Dem mantra of 'there is no alternative' will be undermined by millions starting to sense that they, through collective action, could have a say in how the country is run, could make the cuts unworkable, could bring down the government. And discussions on 'alternatives' will flourish too, including consideration of what socialism could mean.

Irish Socialist MEP Paul Murphy speaks out: solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza will continue

On 4 November Socialist Party Ireland MEP Paul Murphy along with other peace activists from the Gaza Freedom Waves Flotilla were arrested in international waters and held in Israeli prisons for one week. Paul describes his time in jail.

From the moment that our boat was violently boarded and nearly sunk by Israeli forces, we were told lie after lie by the Israeli regime.

A representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs came onto our boat after we were kidnapped in international waters and brought to the Israeli port of Ashdod against our will. She promised that our return home would be expedited, that we would be allowed to make phone calls that evening and that we would not be strip searched - all lies.

Within prison, the conditions we faced were very poor. There was a deliberate attempt to keep the truth about the assault on our flotilla from emerging by keeping us isolated with only one three minute phone call to our family in the course of seven days detention, which was

monitored and we were explicitly told that it could not be political.

All of our cameras, laptops and mobile phones were stolen from us by the Israeli military and have still not been returned.

The worst of the conditions in the prison - conscious sleep deprivation, being locked up 21 hours a day, no access to reading or writing material, and prisoners being forced to stand to attention up to five times a night - were improved through a combination of our protest action inside the prison, protest action outside, in Ireland and internationally, including outside Givon prison, and the work of the Irish embassy in Israel.

Through those actions, we won political prisoner status, including the right to free association and the right to have access to reading

material.

Of course, the conditions we faced gave a glimpse of the conditions faced by many Palestinians, in particular those imprisoned in the 'open air prison camp' of Gaza by the Israeli regime.

We were fortunate to have running water at all times, unlike 100,000 Palestinians in Gaza. The fact that the Israeli army felt the need to violently attack the boats of peaceful activists trying to break the siege of Gaza and then hold us in detention for a week underlines the criminal nature of their blockade.

It is clear that the length of the detention and the conditions on the final evening in particular, where we were held in what could only be described as a hell-hole, were actions designed to forcibly dissuade activists from repeating the attempt to



Protesting against the slaughter in Gaza in January 2009 photo Paul Mattsson

break the blockade.

Once again, the Israeli regime has miscalculated. Their treatment of

us will bolster our commitment in fighting for an end to the oppression of the Palestinian people.