

All out now to stop the sites!

Rob Williams
Chair, National Shop Stewards Network

The construction workers' strike on 14 December could be the biggest strike in the construction industry for almost 40 years. The electricians fighting to defend their national agreement (JIB) will be taking action alongside the other trades in the NAECI 'Blue Book' agreement fighting a pay freeze. It's the same message, big construction companies with £ billions in their order books, making £ millions in profit screwing their employees to get even more profit and hiding behind this government, their anti-union laws as well as EU law that enshrines the 'race to the bottom'.

But despite all this, construction workers are fighting back and the NAECI workers are taking a leaf out of the electricians' book with their second 'day of action'.

The biggest of the 'Dirty 7' big contractors, Balfour Beatty (BBES), may have outlawed the strike by their electricians but 7 December (D7) saw protests, stoppages and walkouts all over the country. (see www.socialistparty.org.uk)



Corus Redcar photo Elaine Brunskill

Electrician Alan Keays commented after D7: "The day's events show the enormous power and potential of the rank and file when they pull together. This dispute may go on for many months yet as the rogue 7 dig their heels in. We must continue the weekly protests and maintain the numbers, and push Unite to make it an official strike in construction in the new year. Whatever happens the rank and file have transformed the construction sector of Unite in the last four months."

Unite's strike was won by an 81%

margin yet the bosses can run to the courts and use the Tory anti-union laws to stop a just and legitimate strike. Yet it's perfectly legal for them to impose new Besna contracts on electricians which will result in them losing up to 35% in pay.

There's supposed to be talks at Acas between Unite and the 'Dirty 7' on 15 December. This shows that the stoppages are having an effect and the potential for a total victory. But any talks have to be transparent and in front of the members.

If it's true that Unite called off the

official strike last week only because of the threat of an injunction, they should have gone ahead with it and at least called Balfour's bluff. However, they are re-balloting, and we hope that the new vote is an even bigger one and across all the companies and also links many official or unofficial strikes with the NAECI workers.

But the walkouts on 7 December showed that we can't and won't wait to jump through the legal hoops. D7 also saw many public sector workers and young people joining the protests. This is crucial as the government and the Tory press try to split private sector workers from those in the public sector who went on strike on N30 to defend their pensions.

Workers in Unilever have been on strike to defend their pensions. Car companies Ford and BMW are trying to close their pension schemes to new starters. Workers at the building company Cemex are balloting for action over pensions.

The Socialist Party and the National Shop Stewards Network is calling on the TUC to support Unison in Scotland's motion naming 25 January as the date for the next public sector general strike as a follow-up to N30.

Action after N30

The National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) steering committee has agreed to campaign for 25 January to be named as the next day for co-ordinated national strike action in defence of pensions if no satisfactory movement from the government is forthcoming.

The model motion is based on a motion passed at West Midlands County Associations TUC. We encourage all supporters of the NSSN to push this motion through their union branch, trades council etc.

This Union body congratulates the magnificent turnout of TUC affiliated unions on 30 November 2011, and the strong united message it sent to the coalition government of widespread opposition to their austerity programme;

a) notes, with anger, that the government's autumn statement, on the eve of the strike, proposed billions of pounds in further public spending cuts which will increase public sector

job losses to over 700,000, extend the pay freeze for two years, increase cuts to frontline benefits such as working tax credit and extend retirement age;

b) further notes the coalition government's apparent intention to extend Britain's already draconian employment laws, attempting to make balloting for strike action more and more difficult, and now the attempts by ministers to split unions by seeking to make separate deals on the pension cuts;

c) and therefore calls on the TUC to urgently discuss and announce a further and extended programme of nationally co-ordinated strike action on 25 January and beyond, to maintain unity of all unions, to allow other TUC affiliates to join the action, and to liaise with major private sector disputes, such as Unilever, BMW, Ford, the construction workers and others, so that an even wider public/private unity can be built.

Public sector pensions - where now?

Fran Heathcote
PCS DWP national organiser, personal capacity

The high court ruled on 2 December that the government was entitled to switch the measure of inflation used for calculating pensions etc from the traditionally higher retail prices index (RPI) to the consumer prices index (CPI).

Chancellor George Osborne claimed CPI was more 'appropriate'. But the unions have always said it was a deficit reduction measure and therefore unlawful under social security legislation which does not allow the government to use national economic situations when deciding the best estimate of price increases.

The switch to RPI, announced in June 2010 without any consultation or negotiation, was challenged by a judicial review brought about by six unions - the FBU, NASUWT, POA, PCS, Unison and Unite.

All of the judges agreed that deficit reduction was the motivation, but two of them said it was right to take public finances into account. The figures in September put RPI at 5.6% and CPI at 5.2% and the government intends to use CPI in 2012 for the first time to calculate pension increases, resulting in a loss of about 15%. Ministers have so far refused to even negotiate on this issue.



photo Alison Hill

The unions involved are pleased that the argument that the chancellor was motivated by deficit reduction was accepted and intend to urgently lodge an appeal on this issue.

The focus of our campaign now though has to be on fair pensions for all. We need to escalate the action with as much unity with other unions, both public sector and private as possible.

We need to engage as many other unions as possible into calling on the TUC to name the day for the next strike. Escalation could mean simply getting more unions on board. Given the successful strike of private sector Unilever employees, there is real potential for public sector and private sector workers to stand together under the banner Fair Pensions For All.

Tax workers on strike

PCS members working as tax officials at the HMRC joined in a three-hour lunchtime action on 12 December over the introduction of agency workers in contact centres.

The action was designed to highlight the creeping privatisation of work in HMRC and the wider civil service. The year-long trial at the contact centres in Bathgate, Scotland and Lillyhall in Cumbria means agency staff will have access to sensitive data. The union is arguing that the department should use existing staff to help out at peak times in the call centres.

HMRC has faced 30,000 job cuts since 2005 and 10,000 further posts

are under threat.

This dispute comes at the same time as a battle against punitive new sick absence measures, which threaten staff with disciplinary action instead of helping them back to work.

A rep on the picket line at Saxon House in Leicester told Steve Score: "This is nothing but a cynical attempt by management to make it easier to get civil servants out as cheaply as possible in order to meet the unreasonable cuts agenda of the current government. This is instead of investing in HMRC to collect the tax necessary to close the massive £120 billion tax gap."

In brief

Bad idea



One of chancellor George Osborne's proposals in his 'autumn statement' of attacks on working people, benefit claimants, young people and pensioners, is for regional pay. He wants public sector pay to be determined locally. But there are already more than 200 different pay negotiating bodies for the civil service alone - leading to big disparities in pay for people doing similar work. Apart from being inefficient - George already moans about trade union reps having facility time - local pay rates will reinforce low pay in the most economically depressed parts of the country. This brilliant idea was on top of the two-year public sector pay freeze being extended with at least another two years of a 1% pay rise cap.

Bus strike

Stagecoach South Yorkshire bus drivers, members of the Unite trade union, took two more days of strike action on 2 and 3 December in pursuit of their claim for £9 an hour pay parity with their Sheffield colleagues.

Management had refused to budge since their first two days of strike action, but pickets at the Rawmarsh depot in Rotherham were determined to win this dispute. The latest action was taken just two days after the N30 public sector strike.

Glenn, one of the shop stewards, told us that he had been outside Barnsley hospital on that day to support his daughter who was on strike there - so much for private sector workers not supporting the public sector, it's our own families. A mass meeting of the drivers on 4 December voted for further action, on 16 and 17 December and then two more days in January if the bosses don't concede.

Chris Bingham and Alistair Tice

Plodding on regardless

The Metropolitan Police have had to apologise to photographer Jules Mattsson after trying to bar him from taking photographs at a military parade in Romford. A police inspector described Jules' actions as "anti-social behaviour" and that the act of taking photos was "silly" and "gay" and "stupid". The treatment of Jules, who was 15 at the time, was described as "shocking" by his solicitor.

The police have had to pay compensation and costs, as well as apologising to Jules.

Langdon school strike

Manny Thain

Bullying has always been a problem in schools. As the commercialisation of education accelerates, however, it is often the teachers on the receiving end - from senior management.

In Langdon school, Newham, east London, teachers who have opposed the massively increased workloads and far-reaching changes to the curriculum have been targeted by the head teacher.

The victimisation has provoked a series of strikes, escalating from one-day stoppages to the current three-day strikes each week. The strength of feeling is such that, of the 78 teachers taking action, over 40 attend the picket lines.

Following a meeting organised by the local NUT, attended by 80 parents, the branch secretary was threatened with the loss of facility time for organising an event inconsistent with union activity!

On top of the stories of their own mistreatment, teachers recount with disgust how students supporting their action were humiliated, made to stand on stage to apologise in front of the school assembly.

What gives this dispute a further

insidious twist is that supply teachers and agency staff are being used to break the strike. This is supposed to be unlawful, but a loophole is being exploited. Newham council - a New Labour one-party borough under arch-Blairite mayor, Sir Robin Wales - is issuing work 'contracts' to the agency staff. Although these are hardly worth the paper they are printed on, they are enough to get round the legal restrictions.

This so-called 'Labour' council has an atrocious record, pursuing Con-Dem cuts and years of attacks on jobs, working conditions and union organisation. Now it is actively strike-breaking. If the intimidation and victimisation, along with the strike-breaking methods, are successful they could be used as a template around the country.

As we go to press, negotiations are ongoing. But if there is no resolution by the end of term, resources to spread the strike to other schools in the borough will need to be put in place. Further initiatives will be needed to strengthen the support of parents and students, and to mobilise the wider community - and the council should be besieged by protest.

Messages of support should be sent to: nutlangdon@aol.co.uk