

Pensions attacks can still be defeated

The public sector pensions battle is at an important turning point. The decision of the Unison and GMB union leaderships, confirmed at the TUC Public Service Liaison Group (PSLG) on Thursday 12 January, to break up the united front of striking unions which saw up to two million workers taking action on 30 November (N30) is a setback and will inevitably lead to a sober reappraisal of tactics and strategy.

But over the next days and weeks, the left in the union movement can have a real effect in pushing back the right wing's attempts to sell out the dispute and derail the massive momentum created by N30.

The Unite and PCS unions, that did not sign the government's heads of agreement, have now been let back into the pension talks by cabinet secretary Francis Maude. This shows that it was not necessary for any union to sign the agreement that accepts that public sector workers have to pay more, work longer and get less for their pensions.

In Unison in particular, the leadership conducted a desperate campaign to ensure that their signing of the agreement before Christmas was endorsed by their local government and health service group executives on 10 January. In many regional meetings, union officers faced an angry reaction from delegates.

But in many of the more heated meetings, members weren't allowed to vote. This will be met with absolute outrage by the best Unison activists and confusion by many members, who may not even realise the significance of this decision.

This was similar to what happened on 30 June, when Unison stood apart from

the PCS, NUT, ATL and UCU union in that 750,000-strong strike, which had a strong bearing on ensuring that N30 happened.

Many Unison members thought that they were on strike, particularly as Dave Prentis had made his now infamous speech at the union's conference the week before: "This won't be the miners' strike. We are going to win... one day of industrial action will not change anyone's mind in government... action would be needed over an indefinite period."

Yet now we have Christina McAnea, Unison's head of health, admitting "we always knew this would be a damage limitation exercise".

Struggle inside Unison

To many Unison activists, there will be a strong feeling of déjà vu. This cynical approach has been used many times over the last period, especially around conference time. Prentis delivers a militant speech but then seeks to undermine a dispute.

However, despite appearances this isn't an all-powerful bureaucracy. Their desperate machinations and manoeuvres reflect their fear of the anger and frustration of members. Also, this is a fundamentally different period from even that of the previous clash on pensions in 2005-06.

Unison members have faced a barrage of attacks on jobs, pay and terms and conditions. But because of the union's conscious policy of preventing ballots against this offensive in many councils - all parties, including Labour - they have poured their anger into the pensions struggle, correctly recognising it as the best opportunity to strike back in a united

way at the government. Therefore, all is still to play for in Unison.

Socialist Party members, along with others on the left, will be taking the struggle into the ranks of the union, including demanding a recall conference in the local government sector. In many respects, the fact that the leadership had to settle for a holding position in health is a reflection of their weakness.

Here, they had to concede a full membership ballot to get the decision which gives the left an opportunity to conduct a real debate with members about whether the pension deal is acceptable and the need to continue with strikes. Of course, implicit in this is a campaign to remove this leadership and transform Unison into a fighting union.

Left activists and members wanting a fighting leadership in Unison should nominate and vote for service group executive (SGE) candidates prepared to oppose the Con-Dem rotten deals.

Defeating the right wing

Socialists are the memory of the working-class and trade union struggle. Therefore, we have to remind disbelieving Unison members that until over a decade ago, PCS was in the hands of an even more brutal right-wing leadership.

It was the patient and determined organising of the best activists around PCS Left Unity, with the Socialist Party playing a key role that has allowed PCS to act as the 'spine' of the resistance to the government within the union movement.

The fantastic open conference on 7 January, called by PCS Left Unity, was a landmark

event in uniting the left in the union movement and helping to stiffen up resistance in many of the unions, including Unite in local government in particular. This has to be maintained in these other unions after the Public Sector Liaison Group meeting, even if they've refused to sign up to the government's deal.

The National Shop Stewards Network is calling on its supporters to keep up the pressure by moving model motions reflecting this position across the union movement.

The events of 10 and 12 January do not end the pension dispute, although at least in the short term they ensure that it will have to be coordinated outside of the PSLG.

We welcome PCS leader Mark Serwotka's invitation to all unions who have refused to sign up to the heads of agreement to meet together as soon as possible to discuss the possibility of calling further coordinated strike action.

With PCS, NUT, Unite, UCU and others, linking up with the POA who are banned from striking, this reformed coalition could still number up to a million. As with 30 June, action even on a relatively smaller scale can act as a lever on Unison and the GMB by showing their members that the fight is still on.

The depth of the capitalist crisis puts all leaders to the test, both industrial and political. Miliband and Balls have once and for all tied their colours to the 'cuts are necessary' mast (see below), just as Labour councils prepare the next round of spending reductions. Workers have to fight on every available front against the bosses' offensive.

The Socialist Party supports the creation of a new mass workers' party to give the anti-cuts political alternative.

Labour leadership approves the Con-Dem cuts

Dave Reid

Ed 'Moribund' and the Labour leadership have had a brainwave to boost Labour's poll ratings - their slogan going into the next election is "Vote for us and we will freeze your pay and cut your services"!

As well as accepting the government's public spending cuts, Ed Balls, the shadow chancellor, now supports the two year public sector pay freeze followed by measly pay increases of 1% until 2015 - in effect a pay cut of one fifth for public sector workers.

Balls's assertion that it is a choice between pay rises for workers or more jobs is absolutely false - the government has no intention of using the money saved to create jobs. Lower spending power for public sector workers will decrease demand for goods and services, further eroding jobs in the private sector.

The Labour leaders are making it clear that they are worthy representatives of capitalism - including what Miliband has branded 'predatory capitalism'. Miliband and Balls might criticise the 49% annual increase in

the pay of leading company chief executives, but they do not propose to freeze their pay. They disapprove of bankers bonuses but they do not limit them to 1% pay increases.

Some trade union leaders have rightly condemned the Labour leaders. Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the PCS civil service union, and Bob Crow and Alex Gordon leaders of the RMT transport union, condemned the Labour leader's attack.

91% of Labour's funding in 2011 came from donations from the trade unions. Paul Kenny, general secretary of one of the affiliated unions, the GMB, has now questioned his union funding Labour.

And Len McCluskey, general secretary of Unite, which is also affiliated to Labour, said that "this year we have seen one shadow minister after another falling over themselves to endorse savage spending cuts" dubbing four of Labour's front bench "the four horsemen of the austerity apocalypse".

But both union leaders still support the affiliation of their organisations to the Labour Party.

The Labour leadership has been

under increasing pressure because Miliband and Labour has sunk in the polls, even as there is a growing tide of revulsion within the electorate at the grotesque wealth being amassed by the rich in 'Austerity Britain' and huge opposition to cuts in public sector pensions.

Miliband's weak opposition to the Tories has lost him credibility even among Labour voters, with 70% saying they could not imagine Miliband as prime minister in a recent poll.

Most voters blame the super-rich for the crisis. 61% supported the strike in defence of public sector pensions. But Miliband and Balls decided to try and rescue their position by gaining 'credibility' with the right wing media by declaring themselves to be a safe pair of hands for big business if elected. New Labour has returned to its default position of supporting the fat cats - not that it ever travelled far from that stance.

Anti-cuts London election stand

With the support of leading London members of trade unions, including the RMT transport workers' union and FBU firefighters' union, and the collection of hundreds of signatures, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) plans to stand on the Greater London Assembly list, from which eleven candidates are elected to the assembly.

Every TUSC candidate opposes all cuts, privatisation and Private Finance Initiative.

To add your support, email jjpreidie@yahoo.co.uk or go to www.tusc.org.uk

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Party in some areas, workers had a political vehicle to oppose the cuts.

McCluskey said in the Guardian: "Where does this leave the half a million people who joined the TUC's march for an alternative last year? Disenfranchised?"

The conclusion can only be that Unite and the trade union movement need to come together to create a party of the working class to fight the cuts consensus and provide a political voice for the millions fighting it.