

# The trade unions and Labour

Labour lords voted against the introduction of the benefit cap which threatens 67,000 families with grinding poverty and homelessness. Is this the start of Labour standing up to the Con-Dems' cuts? No. Liam Byrne, shadow Work and Pensions secretary, appeared on Newsnight after the vote making it abundantly clear that Labour supports the cap.

In fact the Labour leadership, Eds Balls and Miliband, have made it clear that they would not repeal the Con-Dem cuts if they won the 2015 election. Miliband believes that Labour will not be seen as 'credible' if it pledges to reverse the cuts. However, despite the hatred of the government, Labour is lagging in the polls.

The hope against hope that Labour can offer any defence against cuts is now very difficult to maintain. The question of how to build working class political representation is now posed sharply.

Even the most pro-Labour union leadership, Dave Prentis, has been forced to respond to this announcement or risk the wrath of Unison members. The leaders of Unite and the GMB, unions that also bankroll Labour, have even questioned the continued funding of the party.

We demand that this question of breaking the link with Labour is immediately put to trade union members and a discussion launched at special union conferences on how to use the political fund, posing the question of standing anti-cuts trade union candidates in this May's elections.

But there will be resistance. Prentis said that his members "needed hope and a reason to vote Labour". But there have been no signs of this for years! And Prentis said nothing about breaking the funding link.

In Southampton Unison members are in a bitter dispute with the Tory council involving sustained strike action. The Labour group has attacked the strike and said that it would also cut jobs should it take power. But the Unison leadership has called on its members to campaign for a Labour victory.

Writing in the Guardian, Len McCluskey, general secretary of Unite the Union, said that: "Unions in the public sector are bound to unite to oppose the real pay cuts for public sector workers over the next year. When we do so, it seems we will now be fighting the Labour front bench as well as the government." Paul Kenny of the GMB union announced that such talk by Labour leaders "could have consequences for [unions'] affiliation to Labour."

Miliband was never going to fight for working class people. At the last Labour Party conference he assured delegates that "most of the cuts implemented by the Con-Dems will not be reversed". However, the refusal of Miliband to support the magnificent strikes against attacks on public sector workers' pensions on 30 June and 30 November has infuriated many trade union members.

## Back to 'old Labour'?

Some Labour Party members hoped that with Labour out of power there would be an opportunity to reclaim the party for workers and take it back to 'Old Labour'. Although dominated by a capitalist leadership, up to about 20 years ago, Labour was at base a workers' party with democratic structures and where unions and working class members could bring pressure to bear on the leadership.

McCluskey has blamed the Blairites in the Labour Party for arguing not to back workers but Miliband and the Labour leadership have embraced capitalism as much as the Blairites. Recent events will undoubtedly have led many Unite members to draw that conclusion.

Despite the presence of left MPs like John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn, Labour is today a capitalist party. Its 13 years in power were years of anti-working class legislation including the introduction of university tuition fees, mass privatisation, war and the maintenance of the anti-trade union laws on the

statute books.

The Socialist Party does not believe that it is possible to reclaim Labour for the working class. However, as we have previously said: "We can never say never where politics are concerned. Nor is it theoretically excluded that if a mass workers' party is not urgently built, the impulse for a new party could come from within even a bourgeois party."

The likelihood of dramatic change is hard to imagine. In response to growing anger over the inequality in society Miliband, like many other politicians who wish to defend their system, now talks about attacking 'predatory capitalism'. But capitalism as a whole is a predatory system. It is a false idea to differentiate between finance and other capitalism.

There is no such thing as a benign 'productive capitalism'. In the years after Thatcher and Co deregulated the finance markets many so-called 'producers' made much of their profit from speculation. Now, in the recession, they prefer to hoard their wealth, refusing to invest in research and production as they believe there is no profit to be made. Big business sits on a whopping £130 billion.

But even in the 'good times' of the post-war upswing capitalism was a system based on exploitation. The relatively high wages were

fought for by a growing and strengthening trade union movement.

The trade union leaders may not draw the conclusion that the Labour Party no longer represents working people but their members will. Labour councils have refused to defy the Con-Dems' cuts which are devastating the lives of ordinary people, many will not see the point in voting for them. This was reflected in the sustained ovations at the strike rallies for those union leaders who denounced Miliband for his betrayal of the 30 June pension strike.

Working class people are in effect disenfranchised if all the main parties are united in placing the burden of the capitalist crisis on the working class. It is no accident that the most effective unions, such as the RMT, have broken with Labour, or in the case of the PCS have never affiliated. Trade unions have a pivotal role in once more setting out to build a mass party for the working class.

The Socialist Party has concluded that it is very unlikely that the Labour Party can be reclaimed for the working class and has therefore called for the formation of a new mass workers' party. Under the banner of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) trade unionists, socialists and anti-cuts fighters will be standing in the local and London elections this year.

## Add your name to the TUSC petition

As the leaders of the big Labour-supporting trade unions warn Labour of the risk of losing trade union support, an electoral challenge in the Greater London Assembly elections involving leading trade unionists is being prepared.

A Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) list will be presented which can articulate the enormous anger at the horrific cuts to jobs, pay and services, and at the rich who wallow in increasing wealth.

The TUSC list will involve leading trade unionists in a personal capacity, each of whom represents thousands of members.

An appeal from Steve Hedley and John Reid, London Transport RMT, Ian Leahair, FBU national executive member for London, and Ben Sprung, FBU London organiser, has now been signed by hundreds of trade unionists.

Add your name to the supporting petition: <http://www.tusc.org.uk/supportGLA.php>

# Public sector pensions 'Coalition of the willing' gathering strength

**Martin Powell-Davies**

NUT executive, personal capacity

In the immediate aftermath of the TUC-led retreat over pensions, the 'coalition of the willing', those unions still determined to fight on, have needed time to regroup. But now that coalition is gathering strength.

Over Christmas, the danger of isolation and concerns that members might no longer be prepared to take action understandably weighed heavily on union leaders. The PCS Left Unity Conference on 7 January helped to swiftly galvanise union activists and a call was made for union leaders to meet to agree a coordinated action plan. The NUT is now convening exactly such a meeting with a number of other unions already pledged to attend.

The decision by Unite to reject the Heads of Agreement has helped bolster confidence, as has the action taken by private-sector Unilever workers in defence of their pension schemes. It now seems likely that the FBU may also need to ballot for strike action with the government apparently insistent on an unworkable scheme where firefighters work until they are 60 and pay at least



United on the N30 London strike demo photo Paul Mattsson

13.2% of their salary in pension contributions.

The growing confirmation of support for action in the workplace is helping to reassure union leaderships that they can securely call further strikes. NUT members have been meeting to agree motions pledging support for action as well as responding to a national email survey. Just like the BMA's separate survey of doctors, it seems likely that the results will confirm clear opposition to the deal.

Of course, nothing can be taken for granted. In the build-up to fur-

ther strikes, unions need to campaign hard in every workplace and community to build the strongest support for action.

No worker can lightly lose pay but most will be willing to do so if unions show they are serious about continuing the campaign. After all, if we don't carry on the fight, we're guaranteed to be losing pay every single month in higher pension contributions.

Unions now need to agree a clear plan of coordinated action. At least a further day of national strike needs to be called before April, when the

first phase of increased pension contributions is to be imposed. Unions also need to make clear that this isn't just a 'last hurrah' but part of an ongoing campaign to force the government to retreat further. It could coincide with a ballot of Unison members, giving them confidence to demand further action of their leadership as J30 did for N30.

The lecturers' union UCU executive, at its meeting on 20 January, became the latest union to formally reject the Heads of Agreement. It also proposed that a programme of coordinated rolling strike action should begin in February, with Thursday 1 March proposed as a day for national strike action.

This is a useful starting point for discussion between unions although the exact details may need to change - particularly as Welsh teachers have pointed out that clashing with long-prepared events for St David's Day would not be popular.

There is certainly a pressing need for the joint-union discussions to arrive at a firm date for the next coordinated action. NUT divisional secretaries from branches across England and Wales are being called to an emergency national meeting on 2 February to discuss the campaign.

Hopefully, when the PCS execu-

tive meets again on 9 February and the UCU executive on 10 February, we will all be in a position to announce a common plan of action.

While it will be important to negotiate over the dates so as to bring the strongest possible alliance together, it would be a mistake to postpone a decision in order to try and bring unions like Unison and GMB on board at this stage. A strong campaign is being waged inside health and local government unions in opposition to the 'Heads of Agreement' but, even if it eventually succeeds, it will be several months before these unions could be brought back into action.

Joint-union staff meetings and local trades councils should organise debates so that the real facts about the Heads of Agreement can be explained - so that everyone understands that it means 'pay more, get less and retire older'.

However, a significant joint-union strike in March, even if on a smaller scale than November, will be the best way to support those arguing to reverse the position of unions who have signed up to the shabby 'deal'.

Above all, that united action will send a clear signal to the government that they still face strong and determined opposition to their pensions robbery.