

Socialist Party Congress report

Preparing for the struggles ahead

At the Socialist Party's national congress on 10-12 March, the discussion on developments in the trade unions was introduced by Rob Williams. He proposed, and it was unanimously agreed, to send messages of support to the Remploy workers facing a battle to keep their factories open and to the MMP packaging workers in Bootle who are also fighting redundancies foisted on them by a vicious employer.

The conference erupted in cheers as delegates agreed to send congratulations to the construction workers who have defeated the big construction companies' attempts to slash their wages and working conditions.

Rob graphically set out what workers are facing in the age of austerity. In the public sector, especially in local government, the Con-Dems have been able to push through cuts, a pay freeze, redundancies and privatisation - impossible without the collusion of Labour councillors and often a defeatist role played by trade union bureaucrats.

But the anger and frustration about all these attacks has been concentrated on the pensions dispute. That battle, and the willingness to fight of public sector workers, has had an affect on the private sector by legitimising struggle again. There has been a rash of disputes, notably those reported on in the Socialist, such as Unilever, Wincanton and the Stagecoach bus drivers.

The correct tactics and strategy



Unilever workers on the picket line photo the Socialist

being adopted by the leadership of the civil service union PCS, which includes Socialist Party members, has been important. The Left Unity conference on 7 January played a vital role in keeping united national action on the agenda.

The pensions struggle is continuing, with the planned strike on 28 March - and it could reignite. But whatever happens it has helped to reinvigorate the fighting spirit within the trade unions and it has paved the way for the battles to come, including over the NHS.

The construction workers' battle showed the complexities within the trade union movement - the need to go through the official union bod-

ies as well as organising rank and file action. The trade union officials involved were largely weighed down by past setbacks and the bold and imaginative methods used by the rank and file were essential in igniting and spreading the dispute. But the employers only backed down after there was an official strike ballot.

Through all of these disputes the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) has played an increasingly important role and the conference on 9 June should further develop its significance as a fighting organisation for active trade unionists.

The discussion ranged across many unions and workplaces, delegates explaining how future battles

will emerge. In education for example, school teachers are taking action against privatisation and cuts, as well as pensions, the action taken by the NUT having an influence on the other teaching unions.

Affiliation to the Labour Party was another theme, with a member of Unison pointing out how the confidence in Labour has been severely dented after all the cuts being implemented by Labour councils. Only one third of Unison members were paying into the affiliated political fund anyway.

The long-running witch-hunt against Socialist Party members in Unison is an indication of the fear the union leadership has of the arguments for a fighting democratic union. And the repeated failure of the witch-hunters to win the arguments at employment tribunals is an indication of their political weakness.

Several delegates mentioned the importance of selling the Socialist in workplaces. Many workers will take out subscriptions to the paper, especially if the content is used to develop workplace discussion groups and some will be convinced to join the Socialist Party by what they read.

The lively and interesting discussion and the summing up by Jane James, from the executive committee, really underlined the important positions many Socialist Party members have in the trade unions and the necessity of continuing the preparation for the forthcoming battles.

In brief

Teachers' strike suspended

After a successful strike in London on 23 February, NUT members in sixth form colleges outside London were due to take a half-day's strike action on 15 March. The employers have resorted to trying to drag the union through the courts, so the strike is suspended for the time being.

Nigel Fox, Secretary of Hampshire NUT, explains why the action was planned: "The purpose of the strike is to draw attention to the 20% funding cut colleges are experiencing between 2011-16. It is of the same magnitude as the cuts being faced by the police service, where some forces are looking at privatising large swathes of their service in response.

"We are particularly concerned by the effect on staff workloads - which are increasing by 20% - and the consequences for 16-19 educational provision. One particular strand of funding hit by the cuts is the so-called 'entitlement' element. This is used to fund things like tutorial support, careers advice and the non-examined curriculum. Funding for providing this is being cut by 75%."

Killed at work

Part of the government's crusade against 'red tape' is to reclassify dock work as 'low risk'. But Hazards magazine has recently revealed what a lie this is. Since the end of October 2011, five workers have been killed working in docks at Tilbury, Sunderland, Ipswich and Immingham. Also, on 31 January this year, Health and Safety Executive inspectors issued an immediate stop work notice at part of the Humber International Terminal, effectively bringing all activity at the dock to a halt. This can only be issued where there is "risk of serious personal injury." The Con-Dems are happy to play to the gallery with glib gestures about eliminating 'red tape', while workers' lives are put at risk. A number of protests and events are being organised across the country on Workers' Memorial Day on 28 April.

Fighting the rail cuts

Transport union RMT is organising a budget day of action on 21 March, against the many attacks on the rail industry. The McNulty rail review allows train operating companies to ramp up fares while cutting the service to the public, including closing ticket offices and removing staff from stations. The protests will specifically target South West Trains, where a private takeover of the infrastructure begins on 1 April. The RMT is calling for transport to be run as a public service in public ownership.

Tube strike ballot

The RMT has announced the timetable for the strike ballot of its members employed by Tubelines on London Underground. The dispute is over the demand for equal pension and travel pass rights with other staff on the tube. Tubelines workers perform tasks across the tube network and maintenance and upgrade work on the Jubilee, Northern and Piccadilly lines. The ballot, for strike action and action short of a strike, will begin on 20 March and run until 16 April.

National Shop Stewards Network
6th annual conference
Saturday 9 June 11am - 4pm
Friends Meeting House, Euston Road,
London NW1 2BJ

DEFEND JOBS & PENSIONS, STOP CUTS
ALL STRIKE TOGETHER!

Speakers include:

- Bob Crow, transport union RMT general secretary
- Mark Serwotka, PCS general secretary
- A leading Rank and File member of the construction workers' campaign
- Kevin Courtney, NUT deputy general secretary

For more information see: www.shopstewards.net
 Contact the NSSN at: info@shopstewards.net or PO Box 54498, London, E10 9DE

May Day greetings

Celebrate International Workers' Day by supporting the paper that fights all cuts with a May Day greeting in the Socialist.

The Socialist appeals for greetings from trade union branches, workplace and community groups, anti-cuts campaigns, Youth Fight for Jobs groups and student societies.

Can you get a greeting agreed at your next trade union, society or campaign meeting? Or can you use the May Day appeal sheet to collect pledges from fellow workers, students, or campaigners?

Greeting rates include:

- £300 for a half-page
 - £170 quarter-page
 - £90 one-eighth
 - £50 one-sixteenth
 - £30 1/32
 - £20 small box
 - £15 for up to 30 words
 - £1 per word
- 25% discount by paying before Thursday 19 April. To order May Day appeal sheets and to give your greeting contact bobsevern@socialistparty.org.uk or 020 8988 8781.
- Send your greeting by Thursday 19 April to make sure it is displayed on 1 May.

Construction workers fight on

Rob Williams

Over 40 construction workers protested on 14 March outside the Shard site at London Bridge. These workers were fresh from the victory over the 'Dirty Seven' construction companies who had tried to impose the Besna contract, which would have deskilled the industry and cut wages by 35%. They were now taking on the construction bosses over their use of agency working in the construction industry.

The Shard site is run by Mace who, like all the other employers, use agencies to allow them to pay lower wages than the national agreement, JIB. They use this strategy to attack the terms and conditions which have been agreed with the unions.

Loads of Shard workers took leaflets onto the site. They explained that Mace is a profitable multi-

national company but is forcing the workers to take pay rates significantly lower than the national agreement. Workers are working overtime without overtime payment and are being denied other nationally agreed payments.

It's clear that, after their marathon six-month campaign to defeat the Besna, the confidence of construction workers has been raised. They now want to take on the other burning issues in the industry like agency working and blacklisting.

These protests will continue and they will act as a check on their union Unite and the officials when they enter into the negotiations with the construction companies. The companies want to force concessions out of the union to worsen the JIB but these electricians, pipefitters and plumbers are determined not to offer any concessions and to improve the JIB.



One of the many lively London protests photo Chris Newby