

The paper of the Socialist Party. Issue 637.

The Socialist, PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD Registered as a newspaper at the Post Office. Published by Socialist Publications, printed by Newsfax International. ISSN 1366-9621

National Shop Stewards Network lobby of the TUC

Build for anti-cuts action now

AT ITS conference next week, the TUC will be under pressure to lead the struggle against the government's proposals to slash the public sector. But the fact that the Con-Dems almost sound happy when they talk about the cuts has given the TUC the opportunity to bang the drum for the 'good old days' of the Labour government.

The clear implication of the line that the right wing union leaders are adopting is to say that we should wait for the opportunity to re-elect a Labour government, rather than pursue a policy of direct confrontation with the Con-Dem government.

They are setting their face against the position of the left unions like PCS and the RMT, who are calling for action. The right wing message is that the Con-Dem cuts are bad and a Labour government would not go as far.

The right fear that taking action against the government, whether this is a national demonstration or, even worse, being seen to co-ordinate industrial action across the unions over jobs and services, would be electorally unpopular and jeopardise the chances of getting a Labour government re-elected. Even if this is nearly five years away.

It is inextricably linked up with the ongoing election process for the New Labour leader. The right wing want a continuation of the type of policies implemented by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. There was no fundamental difference anyway between the two of them. For example in one of the main composites at the conference the TUC has included the sentence from the GMB's resolution: "Congress deplores the coalition government's demolition of the public services it took years of La-

bour investment to rebuild".

The Labour government might have overseen an increase in public spending prior to the banking crisis - through the introduction of extra stealth taxes on the working class in the main and the rising economy. This was based on the increase in private debt, as a result of the housing price bubble. But this spending was primarily to boost the profits of big business.

The privatisation of the public sector continued at a relentless level under New Labour. One of the greatest scandals is the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), introduced by Gordon Brown as chancellor. Now the public sector is lumbered with making huge repayments to the private sector investors.

The cost to the public purse was way above what it would have cost if the projects had been financed directly by the government borrowing the money at much lower rates of interest than the private sector was able to do.

TUC leader Brendan Barber has been trying to persuade the union leaders to support the composite by references to the willingness of the TUC to organise "activities" around the country in the autumn. A statement will be issued to Congress next week saying that there will be a national demonstration against the cuts in March next year "with the date to be fixed later".

The argument against an earlier demo is that the unions need time to mobilise their members. They argue that 23 October, raised in the PCS motion to conference, is too early and that people do not yet know of the precise nature of the cuts to come. It is clear that most union leaders do not know how to mobi-

lise their members.

The details of all the cuts are not yet clear but that is not the point. The key role of a leadership worthy of the name is to raise the level of consciousness by a campaign of explanation of what is being proposed by the government. At the same time building up support for a fightback by giving the average trade union members' confidence that the leadership knows what it is doing.

The other main reason for action sooner rather than later, at least in the form of a demonstration, would be as a warning shot to the government that they will be in for a fight if they go ahead with their programme of cuts. There is one sure thing - if there is not action to oppose the cuts, the Tories will proceed with a free hand.

Regional demos?

THE TUC have recently talked of "regional activities" organised by the regional TUCs. But the reality of that is, except for Scotland, at this stage there are no regional TUC demos being organised.

Events around the south east region of the TUC (SERTUC) have shown the desperate measures being used to stop a regional demo. SERTUC met last week and the PCS had a proposal to organise a regional demonstration on 23 October in London, involving the whole of the south east from Brighton to Norwich, including London.

But this was totally opposed by Unison in particular, so instead a compromise position was adopted to have a regional rally.

The right wing in the trade unions know ex-

actly what they are doing. That is to stop the development of a mass campaign against the government cuts. Their position is: "Bring back Labour, we can live with their cuts. Demos and strikes will only make us unpopular with the electorate".

The same thing has happened in other regions. For example the south west TUC showed no enthusiasm for a regional demo either. The left in that region have now organised their own demo with a coalition of left unions in Bristol, led by the PCS through the existing anti-cuts committee.

Other regions should do the same thing, which is to organise demos from below and call on the unions in the regions to support them.

Whatever happens there will be mass opposition to the government's cuts. Many people look to the example of what happened over the poll tax in 1990. At the beginning, there didn't seem to be much happening. But once the poll tax bills dropped on the mat then all hell broke loose.

This mass anger was channelled into a national campaign of non-payment through the already existing network of anti-poll tax unions, led and coordinated by Militant, the forerunner of the Socialist Party. The difference these days is that the unions now can play a much greater role against the cuts in the public sector, after all it is their members' jobs and services that are at stake. The lobby of the TUC organised by the National Shop Stewards Network is an important early step in organising against the cuts and gives an indication of what can be built over the coming months.

Solid strike on London Underground

THE POWER of organised working class people was demonstrated resoundingly on 7 September. 11,000 London Underground (LU) workers were striking against job cuts.

Paula Mitchell

Before dawn, driving past several tube stations on my way to Victoria in central London, there was an eerie emptiness as station after station still had its shutters down.

While LU management were making wild claims to the press about a third of the service running, the reality was being announced over the tannoy at Victoria station: "There is a very, very limited service running on the Victoria line and the District line." Then two minutes later: "The Victoria line is suspended".

The pressure on London's Tory Mayor Boris Johnson is such that he broke ranks with his own party by declaring that the Con-Dem cuts of 25-40% in London's transport budget will be "disastrous". Nonetheless he has supported the decimation of station staff, despite signing a petition against it when he was campaigning to be Mayor.

Three more strike days are planned in October and November.

Chris Newby met rail union RMT members leafleting at Euston station. They got a positive response from the public including a postal worker coming up to offer his support. One RMT member said that the manager at Euston underground station had said that he did not know how he was going to cope with the loss of five station staff.

Greg Maughan and Stuart Walker report that the strike in Loughton, Woodford and throughout the east of the Central Line was solid and well supported. One member of the TSSA on the Loughton picket said that this was the first time his union had taken strike action on the underground since 1935 and that it was about time too!

The strikers explained their first-hand experience of having to deal with safety-related issues, on the nightshifts in particular, and how the cuts would make this next to impossible. One picket explained how his son, who works on the gates at Moorgate, had turned away and disarmed someone trying to get on the tube with a samurai sword this weekend! When the police arrived it turned out he was also carrying two loaded firearms!

Safety risk

BUT MANAGEMENT'S blatant disregard for the health and safety of their staff and the public was shown on the strike day. Trains were sent through multiple closed stations. Fire regulations state that if three consecutive tube stations are closed, the whole line should be suspended.

Trains were sent along the Central Line from Epping purely so Transport for London could say 'the central line is running'. But commuters who thought they were in for a smooth ride got a shock. They were forced off at Leytonstone and had to climb over barriers and security fences to escape the station!

Michael Wrack and other Socialist Party members joined RMT

members on their picket line at Liverpool Street station. The strength of the strike meant that none of the four tube lines running through Liverpool Street were operating.

One passenger did not support the action, repeating some of the lies about tube workers he had heard from the right wing press. But workers explained the reasons behind the strike, and gave concrete examples of the dangers of cutting staff. He was convinced and wished the workers success in their dispute.

Clare Doyle and Suzanne Beishon visited pickets at Seven Sisters where Transport and Salaried Staff members at Seven Sisters (Victoria Line) were happy to be on the picket line. "This is the first time we have been able to be out together and the 72% vote shows the strength of feeling", said one of the women. "Our jobs are under as much of a threat as those working beyond the gate-line. And the safety issue affects us as well! We are there to deal with assaults on the public, illnesses, accidents. Things will be a lot worse if they try and finish off our jobs."

On the same day as the RMT - TSSA tube strike there was a general strike in France and one in India. In Britain, BA cabin crews have voted for renewed action and the London firefighters will be fighting back against redundancy notices and attacks on their work rotas. The pickets at Seven Sisters certainly feel they are not alone and are prepared to continue the fight for "as long as it takes".

At London Bridge RMT picket Brian Valentine told Naomi Byron that: "When people took time to stop and talk about the reasons for the strike



The joint strike was a big step forward.

photo Suzanne Beishon

they could see we were presenting a valid argument."

At the Arnos Grove tube depot, Stephen Turnbull and Bob Severn joined pickets on Monday night and again at 4.30 am the following morning.

They were welcomed by the pick-

ets but a parade of increasingly senior policeman seemed intent on keeping Socialist Party members separated from the picketers on the grounds of 'causing an obstruction'.

See www.socialistparty.org.uk for more detailed reports.