

# Organising to save jobs and services

the **Socialist** what we think

## Determined, widespread union action needed

THE GUARDIAN writer Michael White, commenting on this year's Trades Union Congress, quoted Warren Buffett, the American billionaire, saying: "There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning."

The press, particularly the rabid Murdoch ones, were full of bile against the unions for daring to propose the idea of coordinated action to resist the government's programme of cuts in the public sector.

From the Murdoch press you would not expect anything else. For them any talk of resistance is 'mad, insane and stupid'. But the possibility, and indeed the probability, of widespread action against the cuts is looming earlier rather than later.

There has not been, on the surface at least, such unity amongst the union leaderships for decades. The TUC is not seen as the most radical of organisations but, nevertheless, it was forced to reflect the upsurge in anger against the government. This in turn will have increased the confidence of millions of workers that it is possible to fight the cuts. However, it will require more determined action than the TUC has so far agreed to.

Brendan Barber, interviewed in the Sunday Times, was palpably uncomfortable in having to answer questions about what the TUC was proposing to do, in particular the question of coordinating industrial action. Not for nothing did the interviewer refer to his "mastery of the mixed message".

Barber was at pains to explain that what he meant by the poll tax analogy, much quoted last week, was not "the riots in Trafalgar Square" but "all the little demonstrations locally in middle class areas" which sent Tory MPs back to parliament calling for the tax to be withdrawn.

### Mass action

THE REALITY was that there were any number of demos in 'middle England', many of them in the thousands, by the way, and not small at all. But it was the huge army, 18 million strong, organised in local, regional and national anti-poll tax unions across the country, particularly in working class areas, who refused or could not afford to pay the poll tax that defeated the tax. It became uncollectable in reality and that is what forced the government to drop it and in the process drop Maggie Thatcher as well.

When the question of coordinated industrial action was posed point blank to Barber he replied that a general strike was not "on the cards" but more likely specific groups of workers taking strike action instead.

But the genie is out of the bottle now and the issue of a public sector general

strike, whether coordinated by the TUC or not, can indeed develop.

It is inherent within the present situation, for example, that the attack on the final year pension schemes in the public sector, as is most likely to be proposed by the Hutton commission, will unite the unions in industrial action like never before.

The last time the pensions were under attack was in 2005 and it was the threat of united and coordinated strikes of civil servants, teachers, health workers and others that forced the Labour government into significant retreat.

### Public v private?

CAMERON AND Osborne think that they can create a divide between public and private sector workers over pensions in particular. But if the already low level of public sector pensions (on average around £4,000 per annum) was made even lower, then this itself could be the trigger to more generalised action.

The 'agreement' between Unison, the biggest public sector union, and the PCS civil servants union is an important step forward in putting flesh on the bones of how coordinated action can develop in practice (see page 11).

The anti-union laws make it difficult but not impossible to coordinate strike action across the public sector. But it can be done as the PCS has proved when it coordinated strike ballots across the 200 or so bargaining agencies that exist in the civil service.

And it will be necessary. The London firefighters face a major battle, as do the Birmingham local government workers. The firefighters have already shown enormous determination, with the well attended demonstration and with the ballot results for action short of a strike. But the employer and the government have shown their intransigence too.

Even if the courts step in and try to outlaw strikes, as they have done in other cases, this must not prevent action. We are not in favour of taking unnecessary risks with trade union funds. However, such is the severity of the cuts that action cannot be left to individual unions; generalised action must be organised, if necessary, in defiance of the anti trade union laws. If all the public sector unions took simultaneous action the government and the courts would be powerless to stop them and the anti trade union laws would be brushed aside.

The times we are entering call for decisive leadership from the trade union movement. Some of the union leaders, in an effort to derail preparation for a united struggle, are saying that the workers are not yet convinced to resist the cuts and that 'we will have to wait until the cuts are actually in place'. This is a recipe for too little, too late. It is up

to the left union leaders on the general council of the TUC to demand action now.

The next general council in November should see the left union leaders demanding that, instead of waiting until March 2011 for a national anti-cuts demo, the TUC should organise it before Christmas. How many jobs will have gone by March next year?

The role of the demo will be to prepare and explain to the trade union movement that these cuts are not inevitable and certainly not justified and should be opposed with coordinated industrial action if necessary.

As Mark Serwotka said at the TUC: "not a penny off our pay and not a single job lost". The alternative to the cuts programme should be spelled out clearly by the left union leaders as part of the programme of opposing the cuts. The PCS is highlighting the massive tax evasion that is taking place by the super rich billionaires and millionaires at the moment.

The PCS is quite rightly pointing out that the collection of these taxes is equivalent to three quarters of the total deficit.

### Must go further

HOWEVER IT is necessary to go further. It is capitalism as a system and not just the bankers that has brought about this crisis. Mervyn 'the swerve' King, governor of the bank of England, at the TUC tried to disarm the delegates by basically saying: "Yes, you are right. We, the bankers, have messed it up and it will be you and your members who will have to pay to put it right", the economy that is. But, he went on to make it absolutely clear that for him there is no alternative to cuts.

Paul Kenny, GMB union leader, described King's admission of responsibility as being like "Jesse James warning people in the Wild West about the dangers of train robberies".

Speaking at the NSSN fringe meeting at the TUC Bob Crow urged workers not to hold back but to go onto the offensive, to step up their fight for better pay, and pensions. He called for a socialist alternative. The case for a socialist alternative has never been more appropriate.

The next few months are crucial and there will only be a short time to wait perhaps for the whole of the TUC to act.

The role of the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) is critical. The NSSN organised the first national demo against the cuts and has raised the idea of united trade union action, linking up with community campaigns, since its inception. It may now be required to give an organised national form to the local anti-cuts campaigns already breaking out. Along with the left union leaders the NSSN can give a lead at this crucial time.



Matt Wrack.

## Why London firefighters oppose 'reforms'

On Thursday 16 September, 2,500 firefighters marched through central London to a rally outside the London fire authority headquarters in Southwark (see page 1). All London firefighters have been threatened with dismissal if they do not agree to new contracts that specify changes to working conditions. Following the demonstration, Sarah Sachs-Eldridge spoke to the Fire Brigades Union general secretary Matt Wrack.

### What is the London fire authority proposing?

THE PROPOSALS in London are to change the shift system. We work a day shift and a night shift and the proposal is to equalise the hours between the two. For our members, the concern is that this would disrupt their family lives significantly. It would make it a far less family-friendly shift system.

For the public our concern is that similar changes elsewhere have led the way to reducing emergency cover at night. That means reducing the number of firefighters, fire stations and fire engines that are available for calls at night. That is a way of cutting the service for the public. So there's concern for our own members and there's concern for public safety.

The argument that the employers sometimes use is that there are fewer fires at night so you can have fewer firefighters. Our response is that if you have a fire, and they still do happen, actually it's more dangerous because people tend to be asleep, they react more slowly, they realise there's a fire later than they would during the day and therefore lives and property are at greater risk.

If you have a fire at night it doesn't reduce the number of firefighters you need to tackle it. You need exactly the same number of firefighters to tackle a fire whenever it occurs.

### The fire authority seems to have used very heavy handed methods to get their proposals through.

THEY HAVE. They have actually started the process of terminating contracts of employment. They're legally obliged to

go through a three-month consultation period collectively. That's now underway. At the end of that individuals will then effectively be given an individual notice of termination of contract. Yes it is a very draconian measure. It is similar to what is now happening in Birmingham city council I believe. It's a way of forcing through changes where an agreement can't be reached.

### Do you think firefighters can resist these attacks?

YES, THERE is a mood to fight them. We will very shortly be getting the first ballot result for action short of strike [95% voted for action with a 75% turnout]. As we announced [at the rally outside the London fire authority meeting] we have given the employer notice now that we will be moving to a strike ballot. That will start in a week's time. As people saw yesterday with this huge turnout of London firefighters on the march there is a big mood to resist it.

### A number of unions had speakers at the rally.

THAT WAS very welcome. Speakers came to speak and pledge support from PCS, NUT, RMT, Unison, and they were very well received and I think there is a growing feeling that this is part of a generalised attack on working people and on the public sector in particular.

### There also seemed to be a lot of delegations from other parts of the country.

I THINK that firefighters across the union always tend to support each other. This

*"The argument that the employers sometimes use is that there are fewer fires at night so you can have fewer firefighters. Our response is that if you have a fire, it's more dangerous because people tend to be asleep, they react more slowly, they realise there's a fire later than they would during the day and therefore lives and property are at greater risk."*



Firefighters outside the London fire authority headquarters.

photos Paul Mattsson

march was called at quite late notice because the fire authority refused to tell us where they were meeting until the very last minute so it was hard to plan a route.

Delegations from outside London, otherwise, could have been quite a bit bigger. But yes it was good to see people from around the UK coming across to support.

### The Tory London Fire authority chair, Brian Coleman, seems pretty intransigent.

HE IS particularly intransigent and confrontational and very hostile to unions in general and to the FBU in particular. Our London members are involved in a range of protests. They went to one in Barnet the other day where Coleman is a councillor.

At the moment they've not given us any indication of whether they're prepared to move. So it looks like the action is going to proceed.

### It seems that firefighters are coming under particular attack with disputes in Essex, Yorkshire, Wales and now London.

WE'VE HAD a series of attacks for the past seven years under so-called modernisation, instigated by the previous government, which have now rolled into the unfolding cuts that we're facing under the coalition.

So yes, we've had a number of attacks during that period, a number of industrial battles and I see it getting worse.

### Is there room to make cuts?

IN THE fire service there is a whole range of activities we have to do when not actually fighting fires - we have to train, do fire safety work, fire preventative work and so on.

Like all other public services the fire service is labour-intensive and the way you make savings, if that's what you want

to do, means cutting the wage bill in one way or another. And cutting jobs is one way of doing that.

### Why do you think the bosses are trying to make these changes?

THE ATTACKS are part of the result of an economic crisis which wasn't of our making. So the previous government bailed out the banks without asking anyone for their views or consulting anyone.

The tax payer, ie working people, and their families are now being asked to pay the price of that and part of that price is apparently we're going to see our public services slashed by 25% or more.

Alongside that there's clearly an ideological aspect to it. I think that the coalition is taking advantage of the situation to drive through changes that they want to see. It will lead to increased privatisation in education, health services and a real transformation of how services are delivered.

## 23 October march against cuts: RMT calls London demo



Steve Hedley speaking at the FBU rally.

*We need to show that we will not pay with our jobs for the bankers' crisis whilst the culprits reward themselves with huge bonuses.*

THE LONDON Transport region of the RMT has called a march to support the TUC anti-cuts meeting on Tottenham Court Road.

Steve Hedley  
RMT London regional organiser

We've got industrial action going on in London Underground. Now they're threatening to sack all the London firefighters. Royal Mail could be privatised.

This march is being supported by the London regions of the fire brigades union, the civil service union, the teachers' union and several others.

We're formally inviting all the London regions of the other trade unions to get involved.

This is going to be a national thing in

the end but it's important that we get the ball rolling in London. We can't sit back and wait for things to develop nationally. We've got to start pushing things in London.

We're very glad that the TUC has passed a policy of coordinated strike action against these proposed cuts but in order to ensure that that policy becomes a reality we've got to organise everywhere and the London region is going to try to be the forefront of that.

It is essential that we unite to fight the government's planned cuts in the public sector of between 25% and 40% across departments.

We can't get into a situation, which we had in the 1980s, where the Conservatives picked off the unions one by one, the steel workers, the miners. We've got

to fight this on a united basis.

Please do your best to attend to fight the vicious Con-Dem cuts of between 25% and 40% to jobs and public services.

We need hundreds of trade unionists and public sector workers and young people there to show that we will not pay with our jobs for the bankers' crisis whilst the culprits reward themselves with huge bonuses.

**March from Unity House,  
39 Chalton Street, Euston,  
London NW1 1JD at 11am,  
Saturday 23 October**