

Len McCluskey speaks to The Socialist

# Building workers' confidence

**YOU'VE ONLY** just been elected and already David Cameron is condemning you in Parliament - for correctly pointing out there's no such thing as an 'irresponsible strike'. What are your priorities as the new leader of an important union?

**AS WELL** as uniting Unite, which is my primary task from an internal point of view, the issue of our time is the current ideological attack by this government on the very social architecture, the welfare state, that we've built up over 60 years. It's imperative that we resist that.

We have to give the type of leadership that raises the confidence of our members and the general public.

We've been told for over 15 months now that there is no alternative to the cuts. At the last general election the three major parties put forward a cuts agenda. So at the moment ordinary working people feel that, although they don't want these cuts, they are being forced into believing that there's not really anything we can do about it, we've got to accept the cuts.

Our task is to reject the cuts - not only because they're morally wrong and economically dangerous, that's not good enough. We can't just sloganise against the cuts, we have to explain that there is an alternative.

**What is that alternative?**

**WHEN** A nation is in debt there are only three ways to deal with



Len McCluskey

photo Suzanne Beishon

that debt. One is a cuts agenda, the other two ways are economic growth and dealing with tax.

I'm in favour of attacking the huge amount of money, a minimum of £25 billion, that is lost to the treasury through tax avoidance. We should be forcing the government to tackle that. That alone would stop the cuts and give us enough money to start investing in public services. But more importantly to start to invest in our manufacturing base, which under successive governments for the past 30 years, has been decimated.

We have to put people before

profit. The People's Charter has demands about a fairer tax system and spells out alternatives. We need to arm our members and members of the general public so that they understand that there is an alternative.

**Young people are showing a real determination to fight for their future at the moment. How do you think the trade union movement should support them?**

**NOT ONLY** support them but learn from them. There's 15 occupations as we sit here talking today and

that might grow. It was fantastic that 50,000 plus people came out on the streets of London in a relatively short space of time. This shows the anger out there and what can be achieved through mobilisation.

Trade union leaders have got to see that. They have got to feel the pulse of the anger and not be left behind by it or try to restrict it.

That's why a number of people in the trade unions' leadership have called for an alliance of resistance with community groups. Today I've sent out a letter to our area activists committees, which we have throughout the UK, asking them to get involved in their local anti-cuts committees.

The coordination and the building of this resistance and the raising of the consciousness of our members and the general public as to what all this means is an essential part of any strategy to make the government think again.

**How can we tackle the anti-trade union laws in this era of a new cut and a new attack on workers every day?**

**I THINK** THE trade unions laws are a disgrace. They're no longer Thatcher's anti-union laws they're now Thatcher's, Major's, Blair's, Brown's and Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum's. As a leader of the largest union, I think first of all we have to make certain that they're not used an excuse for us to do nothing.

We have to continue to campaign to highlight the unfairness of these

laws. We're the worst protected workers in the whole of Europe, which is scandalous. We have to make certain that Ed Miliband understands that changing these laws is a number one priority for trade unions.

We also need to become smarter when we're involved in industrial disputes - looking at community pickets a lot more than we have in the past for example.

**What would you say to the many Unite members worrying about their jobs, their houses and the future for their children?**

**RESIST!** WE need to build people's confidence. My experience tells me that when workers are confident anything is possible. What the media try to do is debilitate us, make people believe that they can't do anything about it. It's our job as leaders to try to build confidence and make people feel empowered.

That's why I'm pleased that the poll tax is being evoked once again. Margaret Thatcher was at the height of her power, yet she was brought down by people power. Look at the Iraq war, that was the beginning of the end for Tony Blair because people power came out and said "we're not having it".

My message to Unite members is I'm going to do everything I can to support them, to build resources to build confidence so that we can realise the potential of Unite and Unite can be seen as a powerful force for good within society.

## London Underground strike most solid so far



RMT and TSSA pickets.

photo Paul Mattsson

**THE MESSAGE** sent round the London RMT and TSSA picket lines at 7am on 29 November, the fourth day of strike action against massive job cuts, was: "114 stations closed - pretty much the whole of central London - this is the most shut down at this time on any of the four strikes. Every line suspended and all with special timetable. I think we can safely say this is the most well supported out of the four days of action."

Paula Mitchell

Pickets thought that a bitterly cold Monday morning had put off "volunteers" - but mostly the reason why fewer managers, administrators and non-RMT and TSSA members are volunteering to scab is because now their jobs are under threat too.

The dispute has reached a new level, with three weeks of nego-

tations in ACAS leading to no real progress. Management still insists that any ticket office that deals with less than 30 tickets an hour is unviable. This is when the national average is 12, and the London Underground average is 15! The bosses have even refused an offer to go to binding arbitration.

They demand that the union suspends all strike action and all action short of a strike for six weeks while they review the service; but they refuse to suspend their implementation of cuts! Pickets now agree that if there is no movement after this fourth strike day, the strike needs to be escalated.

On the Victoria picket line the discussion ranged from support for the student protests to the importance of getting a serious leadership reinforced in the London council of executive elections, with pickets deciding that they needed to vote for Lewis Peacock.

## Around the picket lines

**OVER 60%** of trains were cancelled, with many rank and file Aslef members refusing to cross the picket line. Already the swingeing cutbacks have left many stations unstaffed or severely understaffed thus affecting the safety of the travelling public. Many people have expressed their support especially the visually impaired who rely on staff to get around the busy network, which has seen a recent 6% increase in passenger numbers.

The public want a fully staffed underground, which is necessary to cope with the 3.5-4 million passengers who use this vast rail network every day.

Boris Johnson became Mayor of London with a pledge to end striking on the tube. But his inept and vicious job-cutting tactics have sparked 13 strikes and have forced TSSA into their first strikes since the 1926 general strike.

RMT/TSSA want a settlement, we want a fully staffed and safe underground system, but if necessary we will escalate the strike with a two or three day strike from 4 January 2011.

Reg Johnstone, RMT

**AT LONDON** Bridge station the pickets' good spirits survived the cold weather, buoyed up by the number of commuters that stopped to support them. All were very keen for coordinated strike action in the New Year. "What if we, the firefighters and the students all came out on the same day!"

RMT and TSSA members commented on how good it was to see so many students and school stu-



photo Paul Mattsson

dents taking action, and criticised the way most of the media coverage was trying to portray them as violent. They were taking heart from the student protests here, the mass demonstration against the cuts in Dublin at the weekend and the general strike in Portugal.

Naomi Byron

**AN RMT** rep at Leytonstone tube station spoke to Sarah Wrack: "We've been the first union to be taken on by this government - with a deliberate policy of smashing our union. We're obviously in the forefront of this struggle which is going to gradually work its way through the entire working class."

"But we're the ones they've decided to start on - us and the fire-

fighters - we're in the front line, and it feels like we're in the front line as well! So we'll continue to fight and hopefully get support from more and more organisations like the Socialist Party.

"The student protests over the past few weeks have suddenly emboldened a lot of young people which is very important for us because they are the generation that is going to be most affected by all the cuts, not just on the underground but all the other public services.

"So they are part of the reason we're fighting at the moment and they're now coming on board with us as well. We'd be delighted to welcome more students onto our picket lines and into our struggle."