

National Shop Stewards Network **Strategy and tactics - a dialogue**

Transport union RMT general secretary Bob Crow has written, in a personal capacity, to the NSSN and the Socialist Party. Below is his letter and a response from the Socialist Party's executive committee.

An open letter in a personal capacity from RMT general secretary Bob Crow to the National Shop Stewards Network and Socialist Party

DEAR BROTHERS and sisters
I am writing to urge maximum unity in the struggle against the Coalition government's austerity programme.

Such is the scale of the onslaught against our class that no one should be in any doubt of the need for such unity.

There can be no question of any political party or organisation seek-

ing to assume leadership of this struggle or setting up new national organisations that would create disunity.

Instead all our efforts should be devoted to mobilising all progressive forces and building the biggest and broadest possible movement against the cuts.

I would urge all comrades to take a step back and consider how we can best act in a way which helps achieve these aims.

Yours in unity
Bob Crow
RMT general secretary

Response from the Socialist Party's executive committee

Dear Bob,

WE WELCOME your letter as it gives us a chance to discuss the strategy and tactics for the anti-cuts movement with you, which has not been possible up until now. Such an exchange, even if there are differences, can help to clarify these vital issues. We make some initial comments on your letter below, but are looking forward to the meeting that has been arranged between us to further develop the discussion.

What was agreed at the December meeting of the NSSN steering committee to go to the NSSN anti-cuts conference on 22 January? The proposal is quite simple: to establish an NSSN anti-cuts campaign, with the explanatory sub-heading: "Unions and communities together to fight all cuts in jobs and services". And, if that proposal is agreed by NSSN supporters (ie workplace reps) at the conference, to elect a committee (of six trade unionists, four representatives of community campaigns plus the NSSN chair and secretary) to run the campaign.

The myth has been put around that this means 'changing the character' of the NSSN, even its 'dissolution', but when the proposal is looked at soberly this is clearly not the case.

Whatever the outcome of the conference concerning the proposal to set up an anti-cuts campaign, the NSSN will continue to exist with its current constitution, remit, and independent activity. But the proposal to establish an anti-cuts campaign would enable unity to be built between trade unionists and community campaigners in a way the NSSN cannot currently do.

Our hope is that this campaign will bring a new element to the anti-cuts movement in being clearly committed to opposing all cuts to jobs and services including, as the steering committee proposal states: "relentless lobbying of councils and other bodies to persuade them not to vote for cuts".

The Socialist Party has consistently argued for cooperation between the different anti-cuts organisations and we welcome your call for unity, which we share. As with us, we are sure you have a principled approach to this crucial struggle to defend the working class against the govern-

ment's onslaught.

Not everyone involved in the anti-cuts movement, however, has the same approach that the Socialist Party and the RMT have.

The RMT leadership would rightly oppose calls for 'limited' cuts in rail jobs and services. On the general issue of cuts this principled approach is unfortunately not that adopted by the leadership of the TUC. You rightly criticise them and as a result are sometimes accused of being too intransigent.

We are facing criticism for the same reason. Regrettably, many in the leadership of other anti-cuts campaigns, such as the Coalition of Resistance (CoR), do not oppose all cuts in jobs and services.

While this is their formal position, it was clear at their conference that many in the CoR believed that Labour and Green councillors have no choice but to 'reluctantly' carry out massive cuts in workers' jobs and vital public services.

It is not a coincidence that neither Tony Mulhearn, leader of the struggle of Liverpool city council in the 1980s, nor Ted Knight, leader of Lambeth council, were invited to speak - yet Green councillors who had voted for cuts were. Ted Knight attended the conference and was only allowed to speak from the floor of a workshop.

You state that: "there can be no question of any political party or organisation seeking to assume leadership of this struggle or setting up new national organisations that would create disunity". We agree that no organisation can automatically assume leadership - organisations and programmes will be tested out in the struggle, as is the case in the trade union movement.

However, this is unfortunately not the approach of CoR and Right to Work who have attempted to present themselves as the leadership of the struggle. From our point of view, if a national anti-cuts organisation existed that was determined to fight against all cuts to the end and had a democratic structure which allowed full participation we would happily support it.

This, however, is not the case. At the CoR founding conference, for example, there were 21 platform speakers in the plenary sessions with no opportunity for discussion with no opportunity for discussion from the floor. The workshops



Bob Crow speaking to the press on a tubeworkers' picket line.

photo Paul Mattsson



Trade unionists demonstrating against the cuts.

photo Paul Mattsson

were also dominated with platform speakers, with over 60 of them speaking in the course of the day. Contrast this with the democracy of the RMT conference or of the NSSN conference which, in the four years of its existence, has always allowed the majority of the time for discussion from the floor.

We agree that one national anti-cuts organisation is desirable if possible, but not if it is dominated by a self-appointed leadership. The NSSN - which the RMT initiated - is not top-down but has a proud record of democratic discussion which we will strive to continue at the anti-cuts conference on 22 January. Whatever the outcome of the conference the Socialist Party remains fully committed to the NSSN and will continue to work to develop it.

We are very willing to discuss the best way forward, and even to seek an accommodation on the basis of a clear programme and organisational perspective for fighting the cuts. However, the political leadership of the anti-cuts struggle cannot be ceded to people who are acting as a left cover for Labour and others that want to carry out cuts at local level,



Keith Gibson speaks on the Lindsey struggle at an NSSN conference.

photo Suzanne Beishon

something that you have always opposed.

We believe it is essential that a national anti-cuts body exists which is based on a clear working-class programme, including opposition

to all cuts and services. We are very happy to discuss with you how this can best be created.

The Socialist Party
executive committee