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Building the battle against the cuts – now and beyond 26 March

THIS GOVERNMENT has started a war on behalf of the capitalist class against the working class and public services. If they get away with it, this - combined with the continued economic crisis - will mean devastating cuts in living standards.

Even Mervyn King, governor of the Bank of England, has admitted that "the price of this financial crisis is being borne by people who absolutely did not cause it." Such crocodile tears will not prevent more misery being heaped on workers' heads in the Budget of 23 March. Vince Cable has already proudly declared that one of 'his ideas' will be in the budget - the ripping up of employment rights for workers in small companies!

King went on to say that "I'm surprised that the degree of public anger has not been greater than it has." In the next months he will get to see public anger on a scale even bigger than he expected. If such anger is organised around a cohesive strategy there is no question - cuts can be stopped.

There are now more than 600 coaches booked for the TUC demonstration against cuts on 26 March. Many thousands more people are planning to make their way to the demonstration by public transport or car. It is now a commonplace for anti-cuts campaign stalls around the country to be approached by members of the public declaring that they will be marching on 26 March.

There is no doubt that this demonstration will be massive. It will act to gel all the individual workers who already oppose cuts into one, potentially very powerful, whole. Opposition to cuts in Britain is becoming overwhelming; with the latest polls showing only 34% of people thinking that the government needs to cut. However, the demonstration also has the potential to raise the confidence of those workers who are not certain it is possible to stop cuts, and to draw them into action to defend our jobs, pay, pensions and public services.

For the demonstration to be effective it needs to be more than a parade, a 'grand day out'. It has to be a launch pad for escalating the action to stop the cuts. The cuts are multi-faceted and so will the campaign against them be. On the demonstration will be local residents fighting to stop the closure of their swimming pool, libraries and other services. For many of them escalation will mean occupation.

Strikes and elections

ANOTHER IMPORTANT aspect of the struggle against cuts will be standing anti-cuts candidates in the May elections. For the hundreds of thousands of trade unionists who will march, however, it is strike action that will be posed as the next step.

"Million to strike over pensions" was the front page headline of the Guardian following Hutton's pension report and there is no doubt that pensions are an over-arching issue around which unions can coordinate strike action. The change from Retail Price Index (RPI) to Consumer Price Index (CPI, which doesn't include housing costs) alone will mean pensions being cut by up to 25% over time. Alongside an increase in the retirement age and an increase in contributions, public sector pensions are being decimated. This deliberate cheapening of the cost of public sector workers is partly in order to prepare for mass privatisation of public services.

The civil servants' union, PCS, is discussing balloting for action on pensions to take place in May or June. The NUT and UCU teaching unions are also discussing action before the summer. To have these three unions - one million workers - strike together over pensions would be an important step forward.

Unfortunately, however, the biggest public sector unions have not yet made any proposals to ballot on pensions. Some of them, at least, are arguing that no strike action should be organised before September when the government finalises its attacks on pensions.



On the demo in London on 5 March.

photo Suzanne Beishon

But we should not wait - serious attacks on pensions are already being proposed - and we need action as soon as possible after 26 March. Whenever the first public sector union takes national strike action there should be a national mid-week demonstration against cuts and attacks on pensions - so that workers from across the public sector can show their support for strike action and to increase the pressure on other public sector unions to build for a one-day public sector strike.

Such a strike should also appeal to those in the private sector, who will be affected by the switch to CPI, to join. Around five million private sector workers are members of defined benefit pension schemes. Unite is already threatening to ballot 11,000 Ford workers over the issue.

While pensions are the one unifying issue that affects the whole public sector in pretty much the same way, coordinated action can also take place over other cuts. After all, if different groups of workers are planning to strike against cuts in their workplace or sector, there is no objective reason that their trade unions should not plan to strike on the same day as workers striking over pensions; even within the straitjacket of the anti-trade union laws.

The trade union movement needs to be prepared for the possibility that the courts would be used to sabotage such a strike by finding, for example, something spurious with one or more unions' democratic ballot in order to try and stop everyone striking on the same day. The government is terrified of the prospect of coordinated strike action over pensions, and it is preparing for battle - even setting up a 'war quango' to combat strike action.

The answer, of course, is not to fly the white flag before battle is even engaged, but to try to build a movement so powerful that they think twice about using the anti-union laws. And if they do, the movement is strong enough to sweep them aside.

We are not in favour of taking unnecessary risks with the trade unions' resources and funds. However, such is the severity of the cuts that action is essential. The growing opposition to the cuts, as the reality of them bites, means that any strike against cuts could win enormous support from workers and young people. In reality, if several public sector unions defied the anti-trade union laws, in the context of a public sector general strike, and with the other unions promising solidarity action in the case of any legal threats against them, the government would be powerless to stop them and, in the process, the anti-trade

union laws would be broken asunder.

This is a very weak government which can be defeated. Most people who voted Lib Dem in the general election consider themselves left of centre, yet the right wing neoliberal leadership of the Lib Dems have signed up to every aspect of the government's onslaught on public services, even the plans to destroy the NHS.

The latter, however, was a step too far for the Lib Dem conference, which has demanded that changes are made to the health bill. Tory health minister, Andrew Lansley, may make some minor concessions in order to try to help the leadership of the Lib Dems, but this is an indication of the enormous pressure that the coalition will come under as struggles develop.

Retreat possible

IN THE local elections on 5 May the Lib Dems will be severely punished by the electorate for their role in the coalition. If they also lose the AV referendum - which takes place on the same day, it is not excluded that a large section of Lib Dem MPs could demand their party's withdrawal from the coalition, leading to its collapse. On the other hand the 'glue of power' could keep the coalition on the road. What is certain, however, is that in the face of a determined mass movement the government could be forced to retreat.

In the short term New Labour will be the main electoral beneficiaries of anger with the government, in the hope that they will at least implement the cuts more slowly than the current government. That much might be true - but no more. It is only necessary to look at

New Labour's record in government for 13 years to understand that they also support 'the logic of the market' - that is the logic of attacking public services and workers' rights.

Even in opposition New Labour abstained on the Welfare Reform Bill - which will drive millions of benefit claimants into unbearable poverty. New Labour was not prepared to support the student movement, not surprising as it introduced fees in the first place. Miliband's first speech as leader declared that New Labour would not support "a wave of irresponsible strikes" - a clear indication that it would not support strike action against cuts.

John Hutton, the architect of the attack on pensions, was a New Labour minister, commissioned to attack pensions by the last government! At local level New Labour councils, just like Liberal and Tory councils, are carrying out huge cuts.

An essential part of the movement against cuts needs to be the struggle for an independent voice for working class people. Ed Miliband is speaking on the 26 March demo, and several trade union leaders will call for a Labour vote in the May elections. For the hundreds of thousands of workers whose jobs are being cut by Labour councils this will not be met with enthusiasm. The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition - involving militant trade unionists from the RMT, PCS and other unions - will be standing as many Trade Unionists and Socialists Against Cuts candidates as possible in the May elections.

This needs to be a step towards building a mass party of the working class which offers a socialist alternative to the axe men and women from all three major capitalist parties.

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