

Unison strategy to fight council cuts 'No cuts' budgets or 'parallel' budgets?

A Socialist Party member in Unison

At the recent Unison national delegate conference in Manchester, Unison's Standing Order Committee declared that the union could not discuss 'no cuts' or 'needs' budgets because it could place the union "in legal jeopardy".

For years we have struggled to have any democratic debate at conference around key issues like the staggering amounts Unison gives to the Labour Party or the election of full-time officers. Now, in a time of unprecedented cuts, we are prevented from discussing one of the key ways we can fight them.

Unison's pro-Labour leadership is doing everything it can to discredit the idea of needs budgets because it does not wish to embarrass its friends in Labour councils who are complicit in passing on government cuts.

Last month Unison's head of local government, Heather Wakefield, circulated advice to Unison local government branches advising them not to pursue needs budgets. She raised the spectre of the government interfering to set 'balanced' budgets where councils refuse to do so. But even if only one council refused to implement cuts, the support that council would receive, from people

angry about attacks on the jobs and services they depend upon, could force the government to think twice about intervening.

Unison has declared that it cannot discuss 'needs' budgets

But what about if three councils were to do it? What if ten were to do it? What if all Labour-controlled local authorities, 78 in England alone, were to refuse to pass on cuts?

And what is Wakefield's answer? For branches to campaign for "parallel budgets", whereby councils can highlight how much they would like to spend. We see this as an exercise in pure tokenism, unless those councils are then prepared to demand that money from the government.

'Legality' cover

The real problem is not one of legality. It is the refusal of Unison's pro-Labour leadership to put the needs of its members and their communities before the needs of the Labour Party, the leader of which on 30 June was photographed laughing and joking with Cameron and



Unison members need a fighting leadership that opposes all cuts photo Paul Mattsson

Clegg after condemning workers striking against public sector pension attacks.

Contrast Labour councils voting through cuts with the heroic role played by the Militant-led 1983-87 Liverpool city council, which struggled against the Tories for the money needed by the people of that city. That struggle brought workers and their communities together

and forced prime minister Thatcher back. And that was against a government far stronger than this one!

Whenever they do care to speak of the Liverpool struggle, Unison's leaders like to pour scorn and ridicule. They talk of defeat. Well, we talk of homes, leisure centres and nurseries that still stand today!

If it were not for cowardice of other Labour councils and the treach-

ery of the Labour leadership, a united struggle to meet needs budgets could have been won nationally.

Rather than a refutation of needs budgets, the real conclusion to be drawn from Wakefield's advice is that Unison should stop funding a Labour Party that will not support its members. Instead it should use its political funds to help build a new workers' party that will.

Immigration Advice closure shows need for industrial struggle

Eric Segal

Former RMJ Unite rep

One year after the closure of Refugee Migrant Justice (RMJ) in June 2010, the other main UK provider of free legal advice and representation to asylum seekers and migrant workers has now also been shut down. On 11 July 2011, over 200 workers at the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS) were told that their employer was in administration.

IAS workers were organised by the GMB union. Tentative links had been made by RMJ union reps with IAS reps going back a number of years. The experience of our struggle to defend RMJ from closure was no secret. However, on 15 November the GMB announced that 82 jobs at the IAS were also at risk.

So why was no attempt made by GMB and some on the left to draw the necessary conclusions from the

closure of RMJ? A potentially successful industrial struggle against the closure of IAS could have been waged.

RMJ closure

Following on from changes made in the way legal aid was paid under the Labour government, Ken Clarke, the Con-Dem minister for justice, completed the job and sent in the administrators to close the RMJ in June 2010. Eleven offices of the RMJ across the country were closed, with the loss of 343 dedicated and highly skilled workers leaving some 12,000 clients without legal representation. Many clients then disappeared through fear that they would be returned to their country of flight and to torture and persecution.

RMJ Unite reps organised a demonstration outside the offices of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) in London. Calls were made at that demo by

two RMJ Unite reps to occupy the RMJ head office, supported by the national Unite official, and also to forge links with the PCS union in the MoJ.

However, a call to organise a meeting of union reps to discuss this proposal was ignored. Due to a naive attachment to legal niceties a decision was made, during a meeting between lawyers with "experience of occupations" and some London-based union reps, to not occupy but instead "build a broad based campaign". This decision was made without the involvement of union reps and members in other offices.

Fight all cuts!

An occupation of the RMJ head office with the continuing provision of free legal advice, together with a call to the wider trade union movement and the refugee community itself for financial and other support, would have provided a beacon of resistance to cuts in legal aid. This would have been a concrete defence against attacks on the poor, vulnerable and dispossessed under the Con-Dem onslaught. Indeed, some not for profit organisations and charities also under threat were waiting in anticipation for a lead on how to fight anticipated cuts.

Our unsuccessful struggle to defend the RMJ was the first skirmish in a battle against a divided but intransigent Con-Dem government. But the lessons of our struggle must not be lost. No 'broad based' campaign can replace a determined working class struggle to defend our jobs and services.

If we learn the lessons of past struggles the question is not whether we can beat this government but with what do we replace it.

Defending state education Brighton academy victory

Dave Richards

Former Varndean governor and Brighton Socialist Party member

I was a governor at Varndean school for over four years because I passionately believe in a properly resourced comprehensive education system, open to all regardless of their background.

But applying for 'academy' status was raised at a governors' meeting.

Governors could not discuss the issue outside of the meeting, even with partners. I resigned to join with others actively campaigning against academy status.

Varndean School Against Academies organised to lobby the governors. This followed a very successful public meeting on 17 June, which saw calls for further action including parent, staff and student protests and industrial action by the staff.

Around 80 people gathered at the school and held a noisy protest outside the room where the governors had their meeting. What was particularly encouraging was the involvement in the lobby of representatives from key trade unions such as the NUT and Unison alongside students, former students, parents, local people and campaigners.

All of those who spoke, including a former head girl who left the school in 1952, stressed the importance of defending public education. Socialist Party member Julie Donovan highlighted the impact a shift to academy status would have on children with special needs and called on the governors to discuss the decision with the lobby.

Two year-11 pupils were verbally attacked by the head for being photographed conversing with people taking part in the lobby. We must



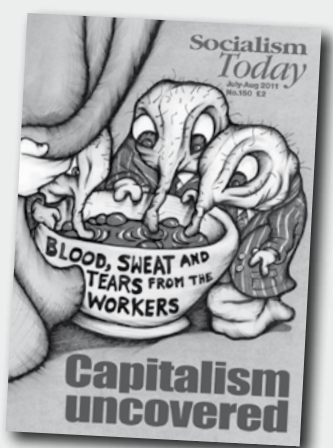
photo Lewisham SP

make it clear that we will defend the rights of students to speak out and to demonstrate to defend their education.

The governors meeting ended without any decision being made. Later the head and chair of governors released a statement which attacked the campaign, but gave a clear commitment that Varndean will not become an academy now or in the near future. They even adopted one of our campaigning slogans, 'Varndean is not for sale'.

This victory however may only be temporary. It is clear that the Tories are hell-bent on destroying the comprehensive education system and rolling out academies as widely as possible. Already there are academy rumours surrounding another school in Brighton and Hove and we should be looking to launch a city-wide campaign to defend public education.

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