

permanent revolution




Unison/Unite days of action 16/17 July 2008

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PUBLIC SECTOR PAY

Make this the beginning of the fightback!

OURTWO-DAY strike involving hundreds of thousands of UNISON members across England, Wales and the north of Ireland, along with some 40,000 local government workers in UNITE, is the single biggest protest yet against the government's public sector pay freeze – in reality, pay cuts for millions of us. Among those at the sharp end of year-on-year cuts in real pay are some 250,000 mainly women workers in local authorities, who still make less than £6.50 an hour.

The current strike could be the start of something big, but we must make sure that these July days go beyond protest and mark the start of a sustained movement across the public sector unions that puts paid to New Labour's policy of pay restraint for some of the poorest workers in Britain today.

Of course, the fightback is long overdue.

Council workers have already sustained at least two years of real pay cuts and, with the cost of basic foodstuffs and essential utilities like gas and electricity skyrocketing far above any official measure of inflation, the time has come for us to act and put serious pressure on the local authority bosses and the government to cough up.

Even if the employers were to meet the joint unions' pay claim of 6% (or £1,000) in full it would only partly compensate for the decline in our spending power in recent years. That makes it vital that members reject any shoddy "compromise" in response to the first hint of a slightly improved offer. As a matter of principle, we should be fighting to win flat rate increases for all our members in the future and wage rises that are guaranteed to compensate for the true increase in living costs.

The money is there

The local government employers admit that their offer is "not generous", but claim 2.45% is really all they can afford in the current "difficult economic climate". This line will cut little ice with council workers as awareness grows that local authority reserves have risen dramatically in the past six years and are now approaching £13 billion.

Still, the Tory-controlled employers' body is not alone in calling the shots. After all, the pay cut on offer to us is a local variation on the Brown/Darling prescription for the public sector as a whole. Amid the calls for wage restraint from Downing Street and Whitehall, and Brown's insistence that the rest of us stop wasting food, we've seen that the government not only finds the money to bankroll the bloody occupations of Iraq

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and Afghanistan but also to bail out the failed Metronet private consortium on London Underground to the tune of billions of pounds.

Meanwhile, MPs have selflessly turned down a proposed pay increase in favour of enhanced expense allowances even as City bonuses managed to reach £13 billion in the past year despite the financial crisis.

Public sector unity

Until this month UNISON, by far the biggest public sector union, has been the crucial missing link in developing effective resistance to the Brown/Darling pay freeze. Members of the PCS, especially in jobcentres, have held numerous strikes over pay and job cuts in the last two years. On 24 April the NUT and lecturers' union UCU, alongside sections of the PCS, staged a highly effective day of strike action.

But, even though the official 1 April deadline for the local government pay settlement had passed and the employers' body had made two offers below even the Consumer Price Index, UNISON and the other local government unions did not take part.

We might ask why healthworkers are not picketing or marching with us today. The answer is only too simple: UNISON full-time

officials like Mike Jackson and Karen Jennings (now a New Labour parliamentary candidate), have worked overtime to secure an abysmal three-year framework agreement that means real pay cuts for the vast majority of NHS staff from now until 2011. Meanwhile, GMB and UNITE members in the NHS had overwhelmingly rejected the offer.

The key UNISON officials – unelected and unaccountable to the membership – behaved much the same as their GMB counterparts, who put forward the local government pay offer of 2.45% without a recommendation and got the result they desired – acceptance of a pay cut on a very low turn-out.

Our own strike action would have been that much more effective if teachers had joined the action. But the executive of the NUT refused to sanction a ballot for further strikes in the summer term; again highlighting the difficulties of securing united action at the top of the unions.

In the face of these bureaucratic manoeuvres and obstruction, what we need is much more co-ordination at the base of our unions. In some areas we can achieve this through trades councils, but more often we will need to develop joint action committees involving representatives from a range of public sector unions. Local circumstances will

dictate different approaches, but we must dramatically increase the pressure on the union bureaucracies both nationally and regionally.

Don't shield Brown

The undeniable threat of a Tory government in 2010 mustn't serve as an excuse for holding back in the here and now. The sinking New Labour boat needs serious rocking – and needs it now. The pipedream of many key union leaders that Gordon Brown's coronation as Tony Blair's successor would mark a dramatic change in policies has turned into a living nightmare. Labour's opinion poll ratings are in freefall, with even the safest of Glasgow parliamentary seats now vulnerable after Brown's disastrous year at 10 Downing Street, with the credit crunch and rising inflation only part of the explanation.

Brown has simply delivered more Blairism, just without the glitz: a neo-liberal regime of sharper income inequality, low taxes on the rich and corporate profits, and ever tighter spending limits for a public sector faced with the unceasing threat of privatisation, whether through the front or back door.

A crucial opportunity

With New Labour having angered so much of its historical voting base and more reliant than at any time in two decades on union funding, the present pay fight offers the best chance in years to achieve some real gains in the here and now – not promises of future legislation. Unfortunately, there are few signs that the likes of Dave Prentis and Tony Woodley are prepared to mount a sustained challenge.

That makes it all the more vital that activists in UNISON and UNITE seize on the July strikes and the pay campaign to recruit to their unions and start to rebuild stewards' organisation in their branches. The UNISON leadership not only continues to pour money into the Labour Link, without conditions; it has spent tens of thousands on hounding long-standing, committed left activists out of the union, with former Plymouth branch secretary, Tony Staunton, already expelled, four supporters of the Socialist Party, including NEC members Glenn Kelly, facing the threat of serious disciplinary action and NHS worker Yunus Baksh now sacked by his employer with the apparent connivance of UNISON officials.

The 2008 pay campaign should kick-start not just the fightback against the local authority bosses and our government, but the struggle to reclaim our unions and make them really "fit for purpose":

- ▶ Fight for the full pay claim
- ▶ Establish elected and accountable local and regional strike committees
- ▶ Build local action committees across the public sector, drawing in local residents and service users
- ▶ Join the United Left in UNISON: help organise the rank and file, and create a fighting, democratic union.

SOS LAMBETH

Uniting to defend public services!

THE SAVE Our Services (SOS) campaign in Lambeth is a broad anti-privatisation campaign, set up by a group of local trade union and community groups who want to unite to fight against Lambeth Council's plans to cut or privatise our local services. The campaign has brought together local teachers, lecturers, local government workers, community groups and residents who want to stop these plans from going ahead.

Already we have seen Lambeth transfer its housing to an ALMO, despite not getting a majority vote in favour, and now it's proposing to give private companies ten-year contracts worth over £1.2 billion to run housing services – without consulting tenants and without even considering whether the services could be provided in-house! If this goes ahead, hundreds of Lambeth staff could be transferred to private firms with services divorced from the limited democratic control that still exists. Lambeth UNISON members are getting ready to take action and will be holding a consultative ballot on industrial action in a bid to stop this privatisation.

But Lambeth Council are not stopping there. They may soon allow hedge fund speculators, ARK, to run a new academy in the heart of Brixton. These privately educated city

financiers will control a school in the middle of Brixton totally unaccountable to the local council. That means taxpayers still pay for the schools but our local authority has no say in admissions, curriculum, exclusions and the pay and conditions of teachers and support staff.

At Lambeth College, staff are already losing jobs and "unprofitable" courses are being cut. Senior managers want to spend £2.7 million less on education services for local people. Courses are no longer affordable or accessible to many in the community.

SOS in Lambeth is now fighting back! Already the campaign has held two successful public meetings, organised a demo on the second day of strike action against the pay freeze and organised a lively lobby of local councillors. It continues to draw in trade unionists and residents who bring with them a wide variety of experience and skills. Some were involved in the successful campaign to stop Lambeth's attacks against services for vulnerable adults and carers, others were part of the brilliant campaign to oppose the ALMO. They have come together in this cross-union, workers' and residents' campaign, and are ready to take the fight to Lambeth Council!

▶ To join the campaign email info@saveourservices.org.uk or call 07792 231761