

# Workers' Liberty

UNISON Activists' Bulletin

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*the working class will rise again*

Further delay is demobilising action on Local Government Pensions

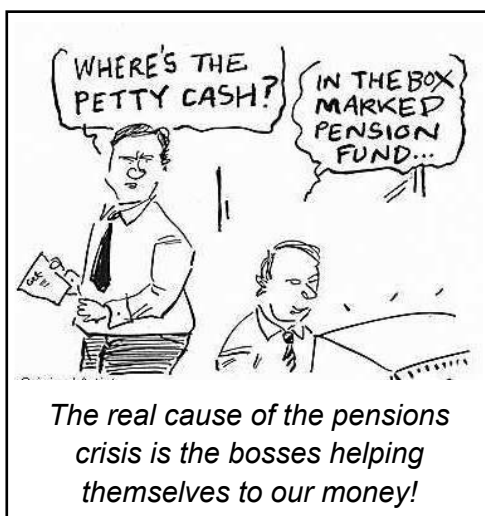
## RE-START THE PENSIONS FIGHT!

Members of the local government trade unions are confused and demoralised by the continued failure of their unions to organise further action in support of their fight over pensions. There are growing signs that the union leaders are looking for a way out of the dispute, which could leave all future council workers, and many current staff, with poorer pensions, and the good work done to rebuild some trade union organisation in the run-up to the strike in March completely undermined.

The unions called off further action after a largely successful one-day strike on March 28th, on the promise of talks. At the talks, the government said they had no choice but to remove the '85-year rule', which effectively put the unions back to square one. Instead of re-igniting the strike action, the unions chose instead to mount a legal challenge, seeking a Judicial Review of the Government's interpretation of European Law. Even if the unions win this challenge, it won't necessarily force the Government to restore the 85-year rule, they'll simply have lost the fig-leaf of being "forced into it" by European equality legislation.

The strike day on March 28th was widely supported, with more union members on picket lines than have been seen in the UK for the last twenty years. Rallies and demonstrations were held in many cities, and the mood amongst council workers, particularly UNISON members, was buoyant - mostly on the basis of "at last we're actually doing something". People knew it would be a long struggle, and the one-day strike could only ever be a first step.

There was, at least for a while, a credible threat of a serious fight for pension rights, using tactics of occasional national one-day strikes combined with sustained, but more limited, action by particular groups of workers, backed up with a levy of all union members to fund the required strike pay. The propaganda, at least, gave union members the idea that they were part of a genuine effort to defend their pensions.



The limited objectives of the campaign - that it was being fought for special dispensation or "protection" for existing local government pension scheme members, rather than against the government's proposals to raise the normal retirement age - meant that massive ground had been conceded from day one. But most people striking on March 28th didn't care - they were striking "for the right to decent pensions", not for a special privilege.

By and large, the left didn't criticise the basis of the union campaign, although they did want more strikes and more demonstrations. But this limitation was a fatal flaw in the unions' approach. The leaders argued that the membership couldn't be expected to fight for the pension rights of future workers, only for their own. Not only was this a deeply insulting view of their own members, and one which basically abandoned the idea of trade union solidarity, it was quickly disproved by the principled and universalist attitude shown by many taking part on March 28th. The leaders also argued that the defence of protection now meant a future battle could then be waged to win parity for the newer workers - the reverse has already been shown to be the case, with the Government using the acceptance of the 'principle' of a change in the ...

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# RE-START THE PENSIONS FIGHT!

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retirement age as a stick to beat the unions with in the negotiations over precisely how much (or how little) protection it is prepared to offer existing members.

Now, the unions claim that they've won some marginal improvements in the protection arrangements on offer to current members of the pension scheme by agreeing to talks and cancelling the strike action. But these crumbs from the Government's table have come at the price of completely de-railing the momentum picked up on March 28th - which was already in danger of being too little action, too late.

It was always wrong to aim for 'protection' and a two-tier solution to the local government pensions dispute. It was always wrong to give away before the fight started the idea that the 'right' to retire at an early enough age to actually have some retirement to look forward to was no longer a viable or affordable option. Having done that, and lowered their sights to simply maintaining a relatively privileged position for existing scheme members, the unions backed themselves into a corner. Now, instead of being the defenders of universal access to a living pension at a reasonable age, the unions are defenders of out-dated privilege for what will become an ever-decreasing minority of local government workers.

The Government have predictably offered protection only for the oldest existing members, calculating that if the union will sell out future members for the sake of protecting current members, it might well be persuaded to sell out some of the current membership for the sake of protecting the rest. Every step backwards by the union leadership here is followed by an equivalent step forward by the Government.

UNISON's Local Government Service Group Executive met on May 17th and decided to put off making a decision on strategy until a further meeting on June 8th! Reports indicate that there was only a minority in support of continuing any kind of industrial strategy, with a majority arguing either for reliance on legal challenges or for continuing talks with the Government over the extent of the limited protection they're prepared to offer.

This is the inevitable result of basing a campaign around such a limited perspective. The lack of a credible fight from the union leadership on pensions should provide a massive opportunity for the UNISON left to at least offer an alternative, but the failings in the left have also been exposed by the stagnation of the dispute. Neither the Socialist Party nor the UNISON United Left ever clearly criticised the strategic limitations of a dispute posed in terms of protection for existing members rather than a principled fight for pension rights for all local government workers, so neither the SP nor the UUL have been able to explain or challenge the leadership's failure to build on the momentum shown on March 28th.

UNISON members and their branches should demand the June 8th meeting re-instates the industrial action until the original goals of the campaign have been met. But they should also demand that the UNISON leadership learns from the debacle so far, and changes its campaign strategy. There is still time to build a serious fight to defend the pension rights of all local government workers - current and future - but time is running out. UNISON should renounce the idea of fighting only for protection, a special privilege for 'old hands' in a two-tier pension scheme, and instead re-launch its campaign as a principled fight for full pension rights at 60 for all council workers.

If the SGE on June 8th fails to re-instate the industrial action, then it is vital that branches submit emergency motions to the UNISON Local Government conference due to be held in Bournemouth on June 18th and 19th. This conference really represents a last chance for activists to force the union back onto a winning strategy, but the chances of the left doing so are not helped by the fact that they're holding competing fringe meetings on the night before the conference starts! We hope that the left can at least agree on holding a single, united meeting, in order to put the maximum possible pressure on the UNISON leadership during, and after, the conference.

A democratic and active trade union would ensure that the upcoming conference would be used to put the leadership's strategy - and the leadership itself - under accountability to the delegates representing the wider membership of the union. Given the current state of democracy inside UNISON it is entirely possible that that will not happen. Last year, the UNISON leadership used an ongoing and carefully-worded direct-mail-to-branches consultation exercise to deny the local government conference the right to debate the leadership's strategy on pay. It is possible that the leadership could try a similar trick on pensions this year. Calls from the membership must now be very clear - for the meeting on June 8th to re-instate the action, or else for the conference to do so. Nothing else is going to give council workers a fighting chance to save their pensions.

## Ideas for Freedom

A weekend of socialist debate and discussion hosted by the *Alliance for Workers' Liberty*

**1-2 July, The Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road, London**

### **Sessions include:**

Blair, New Labour and working class representation  
The threat of the BNP  
Chavez - a friend of the workers?  
The CPE and the struggle in France  
Kim Moody on US labour and capitalist globalisation  
Greg Palast discusses the corporate invasion of Iraq

**More details:** email [office@workersliberty.org](mailto:office@workersliberty.org) or phone 0207 207 3997

Job losses, closures and privatisation across the NHS...

# WE MUST FIGHT THE NHS CUTS

Having seen delegates vote overwhelmingly at the UNISON health conference for a vibrant national campaign against the cuts, the lumbering UNISON machinery is slowly starting to move. It supported the lobby of parliament that had been originally called by the RCN (although it felt the need to invent its own absurd slogan “Keep the NHS working” in order to distance itself from the RCN's even more absurd “Keep nurses working”) and there is now some mention of the national campaign on UNISON's website.

There are some moves within UNISON regions to establish local 'Keep the NHS working' activity, a nationwide petition and some encouragement to branches to investigate possibilities of local action. However, the more militant campaigning called for by delegates at the health conference is still missing. No date has been set for any kind of nationwide day of action, national demonstration or other unifying activity, and no call has been made for branches to organise local broad-based campaigns, like that initiated at a national level under the banner 'Keep Our NHS Public'.

Crucially, there is still no sign of movement on the call at conference for the union to “find ways to take national industrial action against the cuts”, and no indication that the leadership is interested in carrying out that policy. The leadership have already ruled out organising any action over this year's NHS pay offer, which might have offered one route to national action.

Not only that, but where there is a mood to fight, such as amongst workers in NHS Logistics, due to be privatised this month, the UNISON leadership are dragging their heels in organising, or even allowing, industrial action to be part of the strategy. So much for Dave Prentis's commitment at the health conference that the union would back members who wanted to strike to save their jobs. UNISON health activists must be organising support for the NHS Logistics workers and others facing direct attacks, trying to organise the broadest possible local action, including strike action, and demanding the union live up to the promises made and the policies passed at health conference.

Our starting point is a low level of experience and organisation. Since its creation, UNISON has never organised nationwide industrial action within the NHS.

But this lack of experience can easily be used as an excuse by the leadership to avoid organising any action now, rather than as a challenge that needs to be overcome in order to succeed in this current fight.

Comparisons with the 1988 NHS strike wave that was triggered by nurses in Manchester protesting over low night payments can easily be overblown. That action was taken up and spread nationwide in the space of a week and we can't just expect a repeat of that example. But there are possibilities for localised action like the NHS Logistics dispute, and they could be used to galvanise the wider membership for action. In the hands of a fighting national leadership, that is exactly what would be happening. Instead even allowing the NHS Logistics workers a formal ballot seems to be too much of a risk for the current union leadership.

Activists must be getting their union branches into fighting shape – the cuts are increasingly widespread, and the knife is not only falling in places where Trusts were in the red last year. It's clear that localised action will take place despite, not because of, the national leadership of the union. But action is necessary, and the more that is happening, the harder it will be for the leadership to justify their inaction on the grounds that there is no “mood” for a fight.

The health conference also agreed to find ways to use political pressure – including trying to win the deselection of Labour MPs who stand by while the government chops up the NHS. Although this element of the strategy is unpopular with the union leadership, who fear it will damage the 'good relationship' they have with ministers, and not understood by some sections of the UNISON left, who prefer to call for the union simply to walk away from the Labour Party, leaving the Blairites without any opposition, it could be a pivotal part of linking up healthworkers and the public in a campaign to save the NHS. Standing pro-NHS activists against Labour candidates in local elections is one thing, but forcing the Labour Party to ditch Health Minister Patricia Hewitt as their candidate in Leicester West would be a more significant victory in the long-run.

## ***What do you think?***

The Alliance for Workers' Liberty welcomes comment and discussion in all our publications. Visit our website at [www.workersliberty.org](http://www.workersliberty.org) to post comments or write to us at:  
**AWL, PO Box 823, London, SE15 4NA**

## Things to do in the class struggle this month...

*In each issue of the Workers' Liberty UNISON bulletin we will try to bring you ideas for campaigning activity, events for UNISON members to participate in, and other items we think you should know about. If you know of campaigns or forthcoming events we should be publicising here, please contact us, either by posting details on our website, or by phoning 0207 207 3997...*

### **Public Services not Private Profit Rally & Lobby of Parliament Tuesday, June 27th, 11am onwards**

Methodist Central Hall Westminster

UNISON is conspicuous by its absence from a long list of unions sponsoring a rally and lobby of parliament taking place on June 27th in support of the recently-launched 'Public Services not Private Profit' campaign. As the largest public sector union we should be welcoming this initiative and encouraging branches to organise transport for members to participate, but instead the national UNISON leadership is remaining coolly aloof from the campaign.

The Public Services not Private Profit campaign was launched by left Labour MP John McDonnell and seeks to unite unions, politicians and the public in defence of the principles of public delivery of public services - against privatisation, outsourcing, cutbacks and 'contestability'. As such, UNISON members would be forgiven for expecting that our union would be among the first to sign up.

Other national unions taking part include ASLEF, CWU, CYWU, FBU, NAPO, NATFHE, NUJ, NUS, NUT, PCS, POA, RMT and the TSSA.

UNISON members should be demanding that UNISON adds its own national support to this event, and branches and regions should not be put off by the oversight at head office: organise transport now, and encourage members to participate in this lobby to defend public services.

### **Keep Our NHS Public**

UNISON branches, especially health branches, should be actively engaged in developing local campaigns against NHS cuts and closures. The best ways of doing this is through local groups of the 'Keep Our NHS Public' campaign, who have an excellent website at <http://www.keepournhspublic.com> - UNISON nationally is being a little slow to get on board, but the campaign is an excellent link between workplace campaigning amongst our members, and the general public who are concerned about threats to their local NHS services. UNISON branches should affiliate to the KONHSP campaign, and work to get active local groups off the ground as soon as possible.

### **Stop privatisation of NHS Logistics**

#### **Protest march and rally: Maidstone**

Saturday, July 1st

NHS Logistics, the organisation which ensures safe delivery of hospital supplies throughout the NHS, is lined up for privatisation this month, in the latest step taken by the Government towards a profit-led National Health Service. UNISON NHS Logistics South branch have called a rally in Maidstone (where there are now also hospital jobs under threat following budget cuts there) for Saturday, July 1st, 12 noon in Brenchley Gardens, next to Maidstone East station.

All UNISON health branches should be preparing support for the members in NHS Logistics, who are at the sharp end of the fight against privatisation and cuts.

<http://www.workersliberty.org>

## **For debate and democracy in the labour movement**

This bulletin is produced by supporters of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, a democratic socialist organisation fighting in the unions for a working class, socialist alternative to capitalism and Stalinism.

We organise to promote our ideas, and to foster debate in the trade union movement. We want to see rank-and-file control over the unions, and a labour movement that fights for a society organised on the basis of solidarity and human need not profits and greed. We stand for unions that fight for

their members, and an open and democratic socialist movement which can help to regenerate those unions.

We produce Workers' Liberty bulletins regularly at UNISON conferences, and are now starting to produce regular bulletins for UNISON activists away from conference as well, to provoke discussion and debate, and to put forward our views on the tasks facing the trade union movement today. We also write regularly on union issues in our fortnightly newspaper, Solidarity.

To receive a free copy of Solidarity, the paper of the Alliance for Workers' Liberty, just fill in this slip and post it to us at AWL, PO Box 823, London, SE15 4NA.

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