

SCHOOLS

Solidarity wins against Sodexho

CATERING staff at Haggerston School in Hackney, with the support of NUT and UNISON members, have forced a pay increase from their multi-national bosses Sodexho, taking their below minimum wage £4.51 per hour to £9. On their first day of strike action 35 teachers and two technicians refused to cross their picket line, forcing the school to send students home; in fact, many students joined the picket. Sodexho backed down with a second strike day planned.

This significant victory which points the way forward for all super-exploited catering staff in our schools owes no thanks to the leadership of the NUT whose general secretary intervened four times to urge his members to disrespect the picket or face no support from the union if disciplined by the school. The NUT executive is conducting a review of the action taken by the union which will look more generally at addressing an appropriate trade union response to members taking unofficial solidarity action.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Relocation and cuts

UNIONS are campaigning against plans to relocate the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) policy division, which risks haemorrhaging key expertise within the safety body.

Under the proposals the majority of non-operational functions will move from London to a single headquarters building in Bootle, although field operational staff will remain at Rose Court until 2013.

The unions argue that HSE has already admitted that the move will not save money and will lead to many experienced staff leaving, which will undermine safety provision for the foreseeable future.

Government funding cutbacks have already led to the loss of 350 jobs, making it highly unlikely that most workplaces will see an inspector more than once in 20 years.

The final decision is not expected to be taken until later this year, giving unions time to organise.

LONDON UNDERGROUND

Metronet ballot

THE RMT and TSSA unions have begun balloting 2,600 Metronet workers over strike action. Since Metronet — responsible for the maintenance of nine London Underground lines — went into administration last month, there has been no guarantee against job losses or forced transfers and workers face a 10% cut in pensions. TfL and Ken Livingstone show no signs of taking the step of bringing work back in house.

If it happens, this will be TSSA's first strike action since the 1926 general strike and it is good to see the two main unions on the tube co-operating. Both unions should also ballot all grades of LUL workers to fight the planned closure of 40 ticket offices.

Striking alone

MEETINGS between the RMT and management have come to nothing after one day's strike action last month of detrainment workers and drivers on the northern end of the Bakerloo line. Detrainment workers, who ensure trains are empty when they reach the end of the line, are being pushed into working by themselves despite the higher levels of assaults in that part of north west London. Workers who are medically restricted often do this job, and on the picket lines management openly said they had to make these cuts because workers were

off sick too often! Passengers also want to know that stations are safe, especially at night. Lone-working had to be revoked after a passenger fatality at Liverpool St.

It seems that drivers are unwilling to take another day's strike action which would leave the detrainment staff seriously weakened in this dispute. During the last strike all ASLEF unionised drivers crossed RMT picket lines. RMT members should work with the strikers to broaden this campaign on a public safety front, supporting the provisional date set for the next strike on 22 August, the day of the England vs. Germany friendly at Wembley.

REFUSE COLLECTION

Salford win

AN agreement have been reached between Salford City Council and the refuse collection workers in the T&G section of Unite. Union members voted unanimously to accept the deal and end a dispute involving strike action. They were fighting casualisation of jobs and the undermining of council pay and conditions. The council has now committed to ensuring that staffing levels for refuse collection and street cleansing are established on the basis of need, and any additional staff will be recruited on permanent contracts. Recycling services will transfer to direct council contracts by 1 November.

LEARN TO EARN

RECENTLY I was offered £50 by a mate to spend a day at a training course. Easy money, I thought. Unfortunately my mate failed to tell me that the course was in customer service, and I'd have to bite the back of my hand in frustration at the rubbish being spouted by the instructors, and at the total waste of education funding the whole enterprise turned out to be.

You get used to being told by right-wingers that there's just not enough money to fund English for Speakers of Other Languages/free tuition/grants/etc. But somehow, magically, the government has rustled up enough cash to fund thousands of customer service NVQs before the 2012 Olympics. I was being paid "loss of earnings" because the centre had failed to fill the requisite number of places that month, and needed to get rid of some funding or be forced to give it back. I don't work in customer service.

The day involved a briefing, followed by short numeracy and literacy tests on the computers. Then it was straight off to a two-hour lecture by some self-made management consultant, who proceeded to tell us that customer service was all a matter of loving your job. When I pointed out that most people don't love their jobs, or have a free choice to leave and do a job they might like more, he refused to believe it, looking around the room for agreement. "We're all part of UK PLC" he held forth, "and we can have better schools and healthcare if we all just worked a bit harder and got UK PLC performing better".

After that we watched a series of extremely dull PowerPoint presentations, when most of the vanguard of the customer service revolution nodded off. On the promise of being allowed to leave early, we roused ourselves to review our numeracy and literacy results — surprisingly, in a room with at least three holders of A-level Maths, no one got above a low level 2, and most got under 50%.

A shocking indication of the poor numeracy skills in this country? Or a cynical ploy by management to get us to sign up for more courses which were being sold to us by enthused young tutors, desperate to help raise the general "skills base" of Britain (with some suggestion that learning was what we were here to do and if we were obstructive we might not get our "loss of earnings" cash. The slight suggestion of protest soon sorted this out). LearnDirect is the starkest example I've ever seen of tailoring education to the needs of business — for all their protestations about funding, it seems the government is happy to pour money into education, when it means training people for McJobs rather than learning for one's own fulfilment.

Amy Fisher

Support the postal workers

Civil service: Build selective action

BY A PCS MEMBER

THE civil service union PCS and the postal workers' union CWU have separate national disputes over low pay, below inflation pay offers, massive job losses, and privatisation/outourcing. Despite national action by both unions it is clear that the Brown Government has no intention of making any meaningful concessions to either union.

Right now the Treasury is clearing the annual pay settlements for the myriad devolved civil service bargaining units. All are guaranteed to mean civil servants receiving less than the rate of inflation in 2007. Members in DTI have been served notice of compulsory redundancies. "Meaningful consultation", the statutory 90 day period prior to declaring compulsory redundancies, has been entered into in DWP, DEFRA and FCO, affecting hundreds of PCS members.

CWU Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward was right to say that "if Gordon Brown, John Hutton and other members of the Government will not put pressure on Royal Mail management to negotiate that must mean they are backing them 100%." The fact is the Government is essentially the "single shareholder" and has pushed "liberalisation" of the postal services further and faster than other EU countries knowing full well that will eventually break up the universal postal service, drive down wages, and cost jobs.

Two unions in national dispute over remarkably similar issues. Yet, to date the unions have not issued an unequivocal statement they will be coordinating their future industrial action.

On 14 June, at a public meeting in London, PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka stated that he had agreed with Billy Hayes and Dave Ward of the CWU that, if the PCS and CWU disputes remain unresolved, they would publicly announce that they would meet together to examine how they might coordinate action.

On 29 June Mark Serwotka wrote to Billy Hayes offering solidarity to CWU members, "Together we are stronger and I look forward to meeting you... to discuss how we can campaign together on these issues of common cause."

PCS and CWU activists should pressurise their respective union leaderships to announce unequivocal plans that will ensure that "together we are stronger" is a fighting slogan that will defend members of both unions. Minimally the would-be-Marxist-led PCS should announce that at least some of its action will coincide with that of the CWU.

The PCS has launched what they describe as "...the widest consultation in the union's history, giving members the chance to have their say on the next steps of the campaign..."

PCS activists should be arguing for public sector trade union unity but for PCS in any case

to take further industrial action including:

- Further national action;
- "Targeted action", coordinating areas in local dispute;
- A voluntary national levy and full strike pay to support selective industrial action i.e. the union to take out key workers to further hurt the employer.

Clearly the Government does not feel sufficiently deterred by national two one day strikes in six months. Unfortunately the union leadership, including the Socialist Party and SWP Executive members, is very hostile to the whole notion of selective action and rules it out on principle.

The "Independent Left" in PCS however sees a role for selective action. We want as much mass action as possible. However, whilst the leadership's standard practice is to have a day of national action then let several months elapse before the next, we want to fill the gaps with action that hurts the employer. Selective action fits that bill.

Selective action means taking out key offices/sections for short periods, long enough to hurt, short enough to prevent the employer setting up a mechanism to work around the action. We do not advocate taking out one workplace for months on end, and irrespective of its strategic position — a failed tactic tried in the past by the leaders of the Executive.

Yet the PCS leadership counterposes selective action to national action, as if they are incompatible. They argue it will cost too much money and be sat out and worked around by the employer.

The Executive have the memory of a dispute in the DWP over the introduction of screen firmly imprinted on their mind. Individual DWP offices struck for extended periods, without a proper judgement of their strategic position in the work process, and spent over £7 million. Instead of learning lessons from the DEFRA selective action pay campaign of a few years ago (which the dominant political forces on the Executive had no responsibility for and which was won), the NEC leadership counter-poses a negative experience. The proposal is to call out strategically placed members in a "hit and run" campaign linked to national and targeted action to prevent a sense of isolation. Of course selective action will cost money but then the NEC should have instituted an all members' voluntary levy.

If selective action is not to be allowed then the PCS campaign will need a great deal more national action, and more frequently, to win our just demands on jobs, pay and services. However the leadership does not believe it is capable of delivering that level of national action. Such a judgement is not unreasonable — it has to be based on the feedback from membership meetings. But dogmatically ruling out selective action is a mistake members should call on the Executive to rectify.

Reject health pay

MIKE FENWICK, AIRESDALE UNISON HEALTH BRANCH (PC)

FIVE months of negotiation since the initial offer of a staged 2.5% have produced no real results. Staging the deal meant that it would be worth only 1.9%. So health service staff were being offered less than the governments own suggested raise. It meant Alan Johnston and the treasury would save millions. And allowed a little wiggle room from which a few extra enticements could be found.

So the final offer now includes a little extra for the lowest paid, some contribution toward professional registration fees and an additional

training allowance of £25 per employee. Overall still a pay cut.

More threateningly the government wants to make this year the basis for a three year deal capped at 2%. With inflation at nearly 5% now that could mean at the end of three years a 10% pay cut in real terms for NHS staff. To this they also want to add a productivity deal... meaning asking staff to work more for less!

In Scotland, Wales and now Northern Ireland the local governments have agreed to pay the 2.5% unstaged. Whilst that is better, it still represents a pay cut.

The unions are now asking their members to vote on the deal.

# ers, fight the government's pay limit



## The strikes are beginning to hurt

*Solidarity spoke to Pete Keenlyside, CWU Executive (speaking in a personal capacity).*

### What impact has the action had so far?

On the industrial front the action of rolling strikes is having a significant effect. Management have had to admit in their own staff briefings that the action is hurting them and are pleading "these strikes can't continue".

### Is a rolling programme of partial strikes the right strategy? What would you say to the criticism that it divides the workforce and forces postal workers to cross each others picket lines?

In the main, the membership understand and are comfortable with what we're doing and are happy to continue on the basis that they will only be asked to take one day a week of strike action.

There is a feeling, though, that if we upped it to two or more there would be some falling off of support. The downside of the action is that some members who are not on strike are required to cross the picket line of others who are. This was clearly understood from the outset and our advice was to maintain disci-

pline and not allow the dispute to go unofficial.

This almost came apart in parts of Scotland and the North West last week with widespread unofficial action as members were either suspended or taken off pay for refusing to cross picket lines or work with strikebreaking managers. Whilst the instinct not to cross a picket line is praiseworthy and in almost every case correct, in this instance it was contrary to the tactic decided on by the Postal Executive and supported enthusiastically by the rest of the membership.

Sympathy for the motives of those taking part couldn't blind us to the fact that they were threatening, albeit unwittingly, to undermine the campaign and play into management's hands and so we took steps to bring the situation under control. Although there was a high degree of scepticism before the rolling strikes, events so far have proved that it was absolutely the correct strategy.

### There are rumours of more negotiations, and of minor concessions from management.

As a result of the pressure put on them, management have had to retreat somewhat from their initial stance of refusing to conduct

any further negotiations. The two meetings at ACAS got nowhere and were little more than slanging matches.

There is a document that has been brokered by the TUC which apparently sets a framework for further negotiations. The Postal Executive Committee have yet to see this and although it was due to be discussed today (8 August) it hasn't turned up yet as there are still arguments going on over the contents. I can't say what my view on it is until I have seen it but it's unlikely to deal with any of the substantial issues themselves.

Management have made some concessions on start times but direct to the members, not to the union itself. Although these are significant, they fall far short of a possible solution to even this issue, never mind all the others. My view on the document will be determined by whether it leaves us in a stronger position compared to management or not.

The problem is that we have publicly stated that we would suspend the action if management were prepared to negotiate seriously and not implement any changes by executive action during those negotiations. You could argue with this position but that's where we are and we have to take that into account.

For the moment, though, the dispute is still live and the programme of strike action continues.

### What's the best way for other trade unionists and labour movement activists to support the CWU?

We are continuing to ask for support from the rest of the labour movement. A national appeal has just been set up and the details will be circulated shortly. We are still encouraging the setting up of local support groups to give support on strike days, to raise money and to help local CWU branches in leafleting, petition signing and pressurising local MPs etc to make public their support.

We are pressing ahead with our demonstration in London on 21 August and are also planning events in both [Minister of State for Postal Affairs] Pat McFadden's Wolverhampton constituency and in Barrow, which [Secretary of State for Business] John Hutton represents.

It would be of tremendous help if other unions brought forward any planned action to coincide with our own. In reality, though, I can't see this happening, despite the noises made by some.

PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka cancelled a planned visit to our Postal Executive this week and has told us that he can't now come until the beginning of September, which hardly indicates any urgency. The TUC have declared their support for us, and if the dispute is still live when Congress meets we will probably stage a fundraising event there and move an emergency motion.

### CWU is of course affiliated to the Labour Party, but as I understand it there has been no motion of support moved on the Labour NEC, and in fact Dave Ward has withdrawn from the committee.

My own view is that Dave Ward shouldn't have stood down as NEC rep and that represents his own political weakness. It was precisely the wrong time to do it.

## Build support groups!

BY PATRICK MURPHY, LEEDS NUT BRANCH SECRETARY

A LOCAL public sector unity committee was set up in Leeds in June, as a result of contact between myself and John McDermott, the city's Unison Local Government convenor (and a member of the Unison National Executive). The idea was to bring activists from as many public sector unions as possible together to co-ordinate opposition to the 2% pay limit announced by Gordon Brown when he was still Chancellor. The initial organising meeting was attended by about a dozen activists from a range of unions including Unison, NUT, PCS, FBU and UCU.

Our first major action was to organise a public rally to launch the campaign. There was some debate about whether we could deliver this properly before the summer break, but agreement in the end that we could not afford to delay. On 12 July we held a rally around the slogan "No to Brown's Pay Freeze", with speakers from Unison LG and Health, NUT, CWU, PCS and UCU. Over 100 people attended.

Since then the committee has focused on the immediate priority of supporting the postal workers. A report of their stepped-up rolling action was given by CWU branch secretary Dave Walton at the last meeting on 24 July, and it was agreed that petitions and other material would be circulated and picket lines supported. There are plans to have a day of city centre campaigning with stalls run by each union before the end of August. The committee will also produce a newsletter which individual branches will circulate to workplaces to ensure that basic information about the different pays claim and campaigns is available to all Leeds public sector workers. With the postal workers' dispute, the need to build public sector unity committees has become even more pressing. Properly organised solidarity can make a real difference to the CWU strike — and Leeds is not the only place it has happened. In Bristol, for instance, a local support group meets in the CWU offices, and organised a march and rally on 31 July. I understand that in South West London, an initial support group meeting will be held on 14 August. Such groups must of course discuss support for the CWU as their first priority, but the logic of them is surely to move towards public sector union coordination on a wider basis.

- For more information or to get involved in the Leeds public sector committee, email [newrypatrick@ntlworld.com](mailto:newrypatrick@ntlworld.com)

- If you would like to find out more about or support plans for a postal workers' support group in SW London, email [sacha@workersliberty.org](mailto:sacha@workersliberty.org)

## Wildcats sweep Scotland

ON Monday 30 July, thirteen drivers from the St Rollox mail centre in Glasgow were suspended after they refused to cross an official picket line at Edinburgh Airport. (Airports are one of the functional grades which the CWU has decided to call out separately from sorting offices and delivery staff.) The 20 or so other delivery staff at St Rollox walked out in solidarity, taking the rest of the mail centre with them.

When managers took the work to Glasgow's delivery offices, what they ended up transporting and spreading was not letters, but the strike. By the middle of Tuesday, with the mail centres now out on scheduled, official strike, most

delivery offices were on unofficial strike.

The strikes spread to Motherwell when their drivers were suspended for refusing to cross a Glasgow picket line, and then to Edinburgh mail centre because of letters from Glasgow being redirected there. It is now being reported that wildcat strikes have spread to Aberdeen and English towns including Newcastle, Liverpool (where postal workers held a mass sit-in) and Chester.

While Workers' Liberty believes that the CWU's strategy of a programme of rolling, partial strikes, causing maximum disruption per working hour lost, is *currently* the right one, it raises the question of what happens when postal

workers from one section confront the picket lines of those from another. Pete Keenlyside argues in the interview about that members should maintain discipline in the dispute. But *what kind* of discipline? Working-class solidarity says that those who refuse to cross picket lines are 100% right, and that the union must give them their full support. Anything else allows management to stage provocations followed by victimisations of activists.

The events in Scotland and the North, even more dramatically than the unofficial strike in Oxford last month, show that Royal Mail managers are eager to up the ante by picking fights. Postal workers are right to strike back.

## ny offer, build for action

The RCN have balloted although their focus has been on getting rid of the staging rather than fighting for an award in line with inflation. The result of their ballot is due soon.

In Unison the Service Group Executive have decided on a consultative ballot, so postponing the industrial action ballot mandated by health conference if the deal was not significantly improved. Only a small minority on the committee voted in line with policy and lost to those who either lack confidence to fight or worse would accept a pay cut for their members.

A campaign to organise a No vote has been set up before ballot papers arrive on 20 August. Based at <http://NHSworker.blogspot.com> this

grassroots group is asking UNISON members to reaffirm their commitment to an above inflation pay rise and organise the fight to win it.

With the postal workers still in dispute, local government workers due to move to a ballot and possible action from teachers and others the possibility exists to create a significant challenge to the pay freeze. But it should also be seen as a challenge to New Labour's current "commitment" to public services i.e. privatising as much of it as possible. Having a low paid and insecure work force makes it easier to persuade the private sector to buy in.

Reject this deal and use the time to build for the industrial action that will be needed to

secure a better future for the NHS and its staff.

Prepare for the ballot by signing the statement at the NHS Worker blog. Download the statement and leaflet and circulate amongst your colleagues.

Organise a workplace meeting to present the case against the pay freeze. Get branch meetings and committees to call early meetings to organise a No Vote.

Link up with other public sector workers and community campaigners in building for the national demo for the NHS on 3 November.

- <http://NHSworker.blogspot.com>