

UNISON ★ MARXISTS



**HOLDING OFFICE OR TAKING POWER?
THE BATTLE WITHIN UNISON**

It seems that the Unison bureaucracy has an interesting take on the idea of a member-led union. Whereas lay members of the union can stand for election to the NEC, or any other committee for that matter, the real power lies with the permanent bureaucracy who ensure the "governance" of the union. At least, that is what they would like us to believe.

The election of a left NEC and presidential team within UNISON was an earthquake. That process is still developing, as the NEC sub-committees are now dominated by left NEC members. At the time of writing the Labour Link Committee elections are taking place for the regional seats. The left has already made important gains in terms of winning a sizeable number of NEC seats on the Labour Link.

But the bureaucracy is fighting back. We understand that senior officials have been speaking at meetings of full time organisers in the regions, directly instructing them to do everything in their power to impede the work of the left NEC. In addition, unelected northern regional secretary Claire Williams has been appointed to a national officer position to oversee the "governance" of the whole union.

It would appear that the union is on course for an almighty conflict. The immediate trigger for this is the ongoing suspension of UNISON president Paul Holmes by the bureaucracy on the basis of undisclosed charges. This goes alongside the bureaucracy's collusion with Paul's employer who has also suspended him, again on undisclosed charges.

This is clearly a very important issue. The behaviour of the UNISON bureaucracy stands in sharp contrast to the attitude of the BFAWU, who are standing full square behind their President Ian Hodson after he was threatened with expulsion from the Labour Party for "supporting a proscribed group."



What this reveals is the rotten nature of the bureaucratic regime in UNISON and the extent to which they will go to defend their (substantial) salaries and positions. It is no secret that there is a very close relationship between this gang and the Labour Party bureaucracy, with some UNISON national officers having played a nefarious role in stymying the Corbyn movement while seconded to Labour. The lessons of the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party are absolutely vital for the Time for Real Change NEC members. Either you carry through a root and branch transformation of the Union and turn it into a genuinely member led organisation, or the bureaucracy will try and strangle you to stop you from doing anything.

The lessons of the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party are absolutely vital for the Time for Real Change NEC members. Either you carry through a root and branch transformation of the Union and turn it into a genuinely member led organisation, or the bureaucracy will try and strangle you to stop you from doing anything.

It is vital to understand also that this battle cannot be won solely within the walls of UNISON HQ. The struggle against the bureaucracy has to be carried out at every level of the union. Members need to know what is happening, they need to understand what the conflict is about and they need to know how they can deepen and extend the gains that a left NEC represents. In short, the NEC needs to mobilise the membership. That can only be done through communicating with the members, developing a fighting programme for the union on the one hand and arguing for a massive extension of democracy with the election of all officials on the other.

Many of the union's democratic structures are empty, with seats not filled on Service Group Executives and agendas therefore set by the bureaucracy. The left needs to be organised at every level. A good start would be the NEC overturning the ban on factions and therefore allowing for the open organisation of a broad left throughout the union. They can learn a lot in particular from the long struggle of the left in the CPSA/PCS to dislodge a deeply embedded right wing bureaucracy. The right wing has been completely marginalised in that union, and now PCS stands in the front rank as one of the best fighting unions of our movement.

The years ahead are going to be very tough for UNISON members. We need a leadership that is prepared to fight, and an apparatus which is fit for purpose. The next few weeks are going to be decisive. It's a battle for the future of the union, in simple terms. If the left merely "holds office" for a year or two then we will have missed a huge opportunity. If Time for Real Change wrest the "governance" of the union out of the grip of the bureaucracy, however, then we can transform the union from top to bottom. But for that to happen we need the active involvement of hundreds and thousands of members. There's no time to waste.



LOCAL GOVERNMENT PAY FREEZE DISPUTE - TIME FOR ACTION!

- A UNISON WALTHAM FOREST MEMBER

Back in February this year, the unions UNISON, GMB and Unite - as the National Joint Council (NJC) - proposed a 10% pay rise for local government workers. This would apply to frontline local authority staff such as carers, cleaners, and waste and recycling workers.

In July, the National Employers for Local Government Services in response proposed an increased pay offer of just 1.75% (2.75% to those of the lowest pay grade). This was a minimal upward revision of an even lower initial offer presented by the employers in May, of 1.5%.

The NJC's original proposal had also contained conditions such as a national agreement on home-working policies, and a reduction of the working week to 35 hours. These were absent from the counter offer made by the employers.

Pay for local government workers has dropped in real terms by over 20% in recent years, equating to substantial pay cuts. With the RPI inflation rate now reaching 3.9%, the Employers' proposal of just a 1.75% raise will in fact cause pay to fall further behind the cost of living.

A clearer demonstration of the priorities of this bosses' government couldn't be found. Having already been forced to shoulder the burden for 2008 through the loss of pay, conditions and even jobs, local government workers have suffered through the Covid crisis only to be told that they'll be paying for that too.

Following the Employers' response, UNISON Deputy Head of Local Government Service Group, Mike Short, denounced the offer as 'insignificant'. He continued; 'These workers, mostly women, are amongst the lowest paid in the country and have seen their pay drop substantially in recent years. This 1.75% offer is nowhere near what's needed.'

In Scotland, tension mounted after allegations were made that cabinet secretaries claimed that local government workers were 'not on a par with health workers and so could not expect a similar offer'. This shows the scale of the struggle ahead - it is not limited to this or that county or region, but affects workers across the whole nation.

Unite, UNISON and GMB are all holding consultative ballots amongst their local government members over the next month. All three unions are strongly recommending their members reject the Employers' pay offer and instead move to an industrial ballot, which will determine whether strike action goes ahead.

For UNISON members, the consultation week will be between 23 August and 24 September.

The potential for joint action by these three massive trade unions in the local government sector - potential walkouts by thousands of workers - particularly in the context of the recent victories for the bold and radical left in both Unite and UNISON, should have the employers scared. Huge events are on the horizon for the whole trade union movement in Britain.



This Tory government, a government run by and in the interests of the capitalist class, is much weaker than its majority in the House of Commons would suggest. There are millions of workers in the Local Government sector, a mass that potentially has enormous power indeed - if it was mobilised and given confidence by a fighting leadership. Unity will be essential to this battle; that means working together with other unions over the course of these ballots and any subsequent strike, instead of treating them as rivals.

We have already highlighted the lessons of the 2011 pensions dispute elsewhere in this bulletin. Now is our chance to go all the way, instead of being forced to back down by a cowardly bureaucracy, and take this battle to a victorious conclusion. I will be voting "yes" in both this consultation and any industrial ballot to follow, and I'd urge all local government members to do the same.



SLEEP-IN SHIFTS - WORKERS DENIED MINIMUM WAGE

- A UNISON CARE WORKER

After almost two years of care workers being lauded as heroes by the media, the nation coming together to applaud them on their doorsteps and politicians dutifully paying lip service, it seems we've returned to business as usual. In March, the Supreme Court ruled that care workers are not entitled to the minimum wage for their whole shift when they have to sleep at their workplace.

This comes off the back of a 4 year legal battle involving two care workers and the learning disability charity Mencap. The court found that when care workers are sleeping at work they are merely "ready for work" as opposed to working and therefore are only entitled to the minimum wage when awake and "actively working".

This could lead to thousands of care-support workers, already on the lowest wages, seeing a substantial cut to their income. Faced with a green light to do so, employers will likely revert to paying a flat rate for such shifts en masse, as opposed to the enhanced hourly rate that has been paid since 2017. One carer stated they could see their income fall by as much as £160 a month.

Crying crocodile tears at the ruling, Mencap stated that they will continue to pay the enhanced rate to their employees and urges the government to change the law on sleep-in arrangements and councils to continue to fund enhanced rates. Edel Harris, Mencap's chief executive, said:

"Mencap contested this case because of the devastating unfunded back-pay liabilities facing providers across the sector. This was estimated at £400m... [agreeing to pay the workers] would have severely impacted on a sector which is already underfunded and stretched to breaking point. Some providers would have gone bust, and ultimately the people who rely on care would have suffered."

While it is abundantly clear that the care sector is near breaking point, this ruling amounts to making the care workers themselves pay for the shortfall. This is an absolutely disgraceful position to take. In particular, it is scandalous that such a brutal attack on care workers would come from a care charity in the guise of better providing care!

Mencap's actions highlight the insidious role charity can play under capitalism, in this case being a cover for pay attacks - after all, the real winners from the ruling will be private care conglomerates rather than those needing care themselves.



While it is abundantly clear that the care sector is near breaking point, this ruling amounts to making the care workers themselves pay for the shortfall. This is an absolutely disgraceful position to take. In particular, it is scandalous that such a brutal attack on care workers would come from a care charity in the guise of better providing care!

Mencap's actions highlight the insidious role charity can play under capitalism, in this case being a cover for pay attacks - after all, the real winners from the ruling will be private care conglomerates rather than those needing care themselves.

This case also brings to light the inability for the capitalist system to provide care for the most vulnerable in society. The system is barely fit for practice, held together practically by threads and could collapse at any moment. Due to its very nature, care under capitalism relies on exploitative practices. This not only sees some of the most essential workers receiving some of the lowest wages in the country, but also leads to high staff turnover, undertraining of staff and chronic understaffing of services, all of which negatively affect patients.

Whether the intentions of Mencap were confused or just cynical in pursuing this ruling, opportunistic for-profit care conglomerates - often owned by offshore equity firms - can now reduce their staff pay and increase their profits. Mencap has called on councils to continue paying the hourly rate, but with many councils facing bankruptcy and with no legal precedent many will instead cut it.



Once again the working class are being made to pay for the failures and inefficiencies of the capitalist system. This is seen again in the plan to increase national insurance to help fund care which will fall on the poorest workers - including care workers themselves! - while leaving the profits of the capitalists untouched.

It is only through nationalisation without compensation and workers control that this can be changed. Under a socialist system and with a planned economy we could end the barbarism we currently experience, institute a true National Care Service fully worthy of the name and link it harmoniously to the rest of the health and local government sector for the benefit of all. That's what we must fight for!

TEN YEARS SINCE THE PENSIONS DISPUTE - THE LESSONS FOR TODAY

- TERRY MCPARTLAN, NORTHUMBERLAND UNISON (PERSONAL CAPACITY)

On the 30th November 2011 some 3 million public sector workers struck in a coordinated effort to stop Tory plans to cut public sector pensions. To put the events into context, this was the biggest day of strike action in Britain since the General Strike of 1926. As we reported in the run up to the action:

"(If) as expected some 3 million workers are involved in the action it will be equivalent to 75% of the total number of workers who were involved in strike action between 2000 and 2009. Also, taken together with the June 30th strike by the UCU, PCS and the teachers, the two major Public Sector strike days in 2011 will have resulted in a figure for days lost which is equivalent to over 50% of the total number of strike days lost across the whole of the British Economy between 2000 and 2009 and more strike days are likely to take place in the future."

After 18 months of the Tory-Lib Dem coalition government's "Shock and Awe" austerity programme, the pensions dispute represented a huge opportunity for the union leaderships - and especially UNISON, which represented the decisive force in local government and in the NHS - to stop the Tories in their tracks. There was a huge wave of propaganda in the bourgeois press in opposition to the strike, with wild tales of guilt edged pensions and huge pay-offs for Public Sector workers. Of course, the press never likes to let the truth get in the way of a good story.

The real situation was very different. Public sector wages were, and are still, historically low. Hundreds of thousands of part-time women workers keep the schools and offices clean, feed the kids and empty the bed pans in the hospitals. Workers pay into pensions throughout their working lives. The Local Government Pension Scheme for example is totally self-financing, paid for by council workers and local authorities.

It is no wonder that workers were angry, and they turned out to picket, march and rally in their hundreds of thousands on the day. The sheer number of organisations represented was astonishing. As one speaker at the Newcastle Demonstration noted

"The radiographers could see right through the Tories' plans and the chiropodists had voted with their feet."



Some 29 unions were involved in total: Unison: Local government and health—1.1 million, PCS: civil service workers—290,000, NASUWT: teachers—227,500, GMB: local government—225,000, NUT: teachers—219,100, Unite: local government and health—137,000, UCU: lecturers—nearly 100,000, ATL: teachers—96,500, EIS: Scottish teachers—over 54,000, NIPSA: Northern Ireland public sector—43,000, Prospect: specialist civil services—32,000, National Association of Head Teachers—24,400, Chartered Society of Physiotherapists—over 22,300, Society of Radiographers—17,500, UCATT: construction workers—15,200, FDA: senior civil servants—12,000, Napo: probation workers—over 8,000, Into: Northern Irish teachers—6,400, Immigration Service Union (non-TUC affiliated)—4,500, Society of Chiropodists and Podiatrists—over 3,500, UCAC: Welsh teachers—3,200, POA: secure hospital staff—around 3,000, Association of Educational Psychologists—over 2,700, AHDS: Scottish head teachers—over 1,300, RMT members employed at the Royal Fleet Auxillary, Tyne & Wear Metro and Orkney Ferries—1,300, Aspect: school inspectors—estimated 1,000, SIPTU: Northern Ireland public sector—around 700, CWU: TV Licensing workers—over 500, TSSA: Northern Ireland transport workers—300

These figures illustrate the scale of the dispute, but more importantly they demonstrate that the potential to defeat the government was there. However, within a few months all of that momentum and energy had been dissipated. The Trade Union leaders could have campaigned and fought for a national settlement that protected all of the separate pension arrangements in each part of the public sector.



Instead, they went straight down the rabbit hole of negotiating separately with each set of employers. Could they have won the dispute? Of course. But the subjective factor - leadership - is decisive. The position of the UNISON leadership at that time can be summed up as "We can't risk taking on the Tories... look what happened to the miners."

But a mass struggle to defeat the government at that stage could easily have been victorious, had the Trade Union leaders had a perspective and the readiness to fight. As we explained in an article written the day after the strike:

continued from previous page

"A mood of quiet determination is developing everywhere. Millions of workers are not prepared to see their families sacrificed for the sake of the bankers and their rotten system. They have been brought to their feet by this strike. They have been able to feel their collective power on the picket line and in mass demonstrations. The next step must be a 24 hour general strike involving all workers in both the public and private sectors."

What lessons can the 30th November strike teach us today some ten years on? The first thing is that – despite the bleatings of the right wing to the contrary – if workers believe they have no alternative they will fight in their millions. Secondly, the bureaucracy is more than happy to let the workers let off steam as long as they can do a deal behind closed doors. Thirdly, without a clear sighted leadership, the movement is fighting with one hand tied behind its back.

The left NEC victory in UNISON is an enormous step forward, as was the left victory in the Unite General Secretary election. Both of these are symptomatic of the pressure building up within the working class. This pressure has been generated, yes, by the crisis fuelled by the pandemic, but its origins run far deeper than that.



The public sector has been attacked time and time again over decades with barely any respite. In the past people used to talk about the "social wage," which was the collective benefit that people received from good, well funded public services; things like youth provision, dignity for the elderly with decent home care provision etc.

All that has been stripped away and it's our members and others in the public sector who have paid for this through lost earnings, cuts in wages and pensions and cuts in staffing levels. It's also them who have fought the tidal wave of problems that the Tories have created in our communities.

That's why securing left victories in UNISON and Unite is so important. But those victories need to be consolidated. It is entirely possible to build a new left force in the public sector unions, that simultaneously fights for a socialist programme and against the dead hand of the bureaucracy. We need to lift the sights of the members to see what is possible and arm them with a perspective of how to get there. The Marxist Tendency around Socialist Appeal will play a full role in that process.

THE STRUGGLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- ALICE PEARCE

OXFORD UNISON (PERSONAL CAPACITY)

On the 10th of August voting closed in the Unison Higher Education pay ballot for 2021. This ballot was set against the backdrop of a period of storm and stress, both for the HE sector and within the union. Unison members at 48 universities have taken part in this process, all across the country.

University support staff, the higher education workers represented by Unison, have experienced some of the most gruelling years of their working lives over the course of this pandemic. They have had to enable the smooth implementation of online teaching and assessment, often at very short notice, alongside taking on extra duties associated with making any in-person activities 'Covid Secure'.



This has served the bosses well, allowing them to justify charging full fees to students who have had anything but a normal university experience for the last 18 months!

As the profits of an increasingly marketised higher education sector continue to roll in, what thanks have these support staff been given? A pay freeze for the academic year 2020/21 – accounting for inflation, this amounts to a sharp pay cut in real terms!

In June, the left slate took control of the NEC of Unison in an historic electoral victory, running under the slogan of #TimeforRealChange. They are now set to do battle with the General Secretary, elected only months earlier, and the right-wing bureaucracy that stands behind her.

One reason this battle will erupt will be around the stated aim of the new NEC to work with other trade unions and even look towards coordinated action with them where possible. The right-wing in UNISON have always taken a highly sectarian approach to other unions, treating them like competitors in the marketplace rather than sister organisations in struggle.

continued from previous page

The potential of a united approach in the higher education sector is clear, however. Recent action by the UCU has ended in defeat, but joint action with Unison could have a markedly increased impact on the day to day running of universities, and yield real results for the workers in this sector.

Unfortunately, it seems as if going university-by-university through the ballot has demobilised members rather than bringing them out. No doubt this is to the liking of the bureaucracy, who always flinch from struggle. Lessons must be drawn from this; a ballot which isn't properly built for will inevitably fail, and therefore become a "self-fulfilling" prophecy in the hands of the strike-averse right in our union.

Nevertheless, there is still potential for a fightback in the future. These issues haven't gone away, and the transformation of our union into one that fights for its members is still the main task. Together with our fellow HE workers in other unions, such as Unite and the UCU, we can carry out the kind of coordinated action needed to make the bosses give us what we deserve.

Only we, the workers, can defend the higher education system from the most insidious effects of profiteering and private sector influence. The university tops are not going to do this. They stand to lose their cushy salaries if universities cease to be money generating machines, and are therefore our enemy in this fight alongside the bosses' government that stands behind them.

We have increasingly little to lose. Together we could win not only a sustainable standard of living, but a higher education system that actually exists for the purposes of education. A socialist education sector as part of an overall plan of production, run under the control of staff and students, is a prize well worth fighting for. We invite every fed-up higher education worker to join us in this momentous task.



UNISON AND YOUNG WORKERS - TIME TO FIGHT BACK!

- CHARLIE PRITCHARD, NORFOLK COUNTY UNISON
(PERSONAL CAPACITY)

For the past two decades, young workers have faced attack after attack on their working and living conditions, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated this decline.

Prospects for a comfortable future have receded into an unreachable distance for many, and young people are no longer impressed by hollow disastrous promises of "economic mobility." Education has been disrupted by a total lack of preparation for the pandemic in colleges and universities, with the quality of their learning compromised.

In a labour market already crippled by precarious work and zero hour contracts, COVID pushed the future of young workers to new levels of anxiety. At the start of the pandemic, 18-24 year-olds were the hardest hit, comprising a third of the workforce that either lost their job or were placed on furlough.

Meanwhile, affordable housing is becoming ever more elusive. In a survey conducted by UNISON, it is predicted that most workers between 27-30 would have to work 18 years to be in a financial situation where they could put down a deposit on a house. Without a serious plan to tackle the housing crisis, generations to follow will be left in insecurity, at the mercy of the private rental market.

The voice of young workers must be heard in our union, yet of a union comprising around 1.3 million members, only 63,000 are young members. This is a very low proportion, considering how many young workers are actually out there in the public sector!

Turning this around means inspiring the young members in UNISON to recruit and get active in the union, first of all. We must organise a national recruitment drive of young workers, with the active involvement of our current young members so as to reach out to this layer as widely as possible.

After years of domination under right-wing bureaucrats - who have consistently stifled democracy both within the union and undermined the Corbyn leadership of the Labour Party - the election of new NEC members under banner of Time for Real Change, including Youth NEC members Lilly Boulby and Keira Hilder, poses new opportunities for young activists to take the lead in our campaigns.

We need to show the young members that the union is prepared to train them and give them the necessary resources to take on the bosses and the government when they come for our terms and conditions. If we do this, we'll not only energise the members we currently have, we'll win the next generation of class fighters to the union as well, and in doing so transform the union into a fighting machine for socialism in our lifetime.

JOIN THE UNISON MARXISTS!

What we're fighting for:

Bold measures are required to deal with the coronavirus crisis. Only a clear socialist programme can offer a way forward.

We must have no faith in the Tories or their hangers-on, whose worship of the market has brought this country to its knees.

Instead of attacking the left, Labour must provide genuine opposition to this shambolic Tory government. Support workers in the fight to put lives before profits!

The bosses and their craven political representatives have shown what their priorities are. We must establish and fight for our own. Therefore, we demand the following socialist measures to protect workers, and put health before wealth.

- For a fully-funded, publicly-owned, and free health service, under workers' control and management.
- Reverse all privatisation and outsourcing. All private health and care services must be nationalised without compensation, and integrated into the NHS.
- Nationalise the pharmaceutical companies – without compensation – in order to ensure that medicines and vaccines are produced rapidly, efficiently, and made freely available to all worldwide.
- Workplace safety must be in the hands of workers' committees and the trade unions. Proper health and safety measures must be implemented, with adequate PPE provided for all workers. The costs for this must be paid for by the bosses.
- A proper living wage must be provided to all workers of at least £15 an hour. End all forms of discrimination; equal pay for equal work. This includes age discrimination, where young workers are forced to work for a fraction of the real minimum wage.
- Any future lockdowns or restrictions must be accompanied by measures to provide for workers affected by workplace closures. This means 100% wage support for those furloughed, as well as full sick pay for those required to isolate.
- If the bosses say they cannot afford to pay for workers' wages, we say: open up the books! Let the working class and the labour movement see the accounts. If firms plead bankruptcy, they should not be bailed out but nationalised under workers' control.
- Labour councils must not administer and implement Tory cuts and austerity. They must instead fight to reverse the austerity inflicted on public services.
- All elected officials in the labour movement should be subject to the immediate right of recall by the members, and take the wage of an average member of their labour organisation.
- Ban evictions and cancel housing debts. Give local authorities the power to cap rents at affordable levels. Bring empty properties and the assets of the big landlords and management companies under public control.
- The financial resources required to fight the crisis must not come from increased taxes or more austerity cuts. Nationalise the banks under public ownership and control. Rather than a "wealth tax" we call for the total expropriation of these financial monopolies.
- Nationalise the 100 biggest monopolies under workers' control and management, and without compensation to the capitalists. On this basis the economy can be democratically planned in the interests of the majority, and not for the super profits of a tiny few.

The coronavirus crisis has exposed the global nature of the crisis of capitalism. A Socialist Federation of Britain should be linked to a World Socialist Federation, in order to plan resources internationally for the benefit of all.

This would put an end to the barbarism of capitalism and allow humanity to begin solving the urgent issues of climate change, disease, and poverty that face our planet.

If you agree with our programme here, get involved with UNISON Marxists and help us fight for a better, socialist world!

SCAN THIS QR CODE OR CLICK HERE
TO GET INVOLVED OR LEARN MORE!

