

# Workers' Liberty

School workers bulletin

Pensions Action  
February  
2012  
Strike Bulletin

## *The NUT must give a lead on pensions!*

Sometimes we need to face unpleasant facts squarely. At the moment the Government has the upper hand in the dispute. On December 19 a number of public sector unions, including some who represent school staff, signalled that they were prepared to surrender on all the main principles of the pensions' campaign.

Effectively ATL, NAHT and ASCL accepted that teachers would work until 68, see contributions increase 50% by 2015, pensions reduce by around 15% over retirement and final salary replace career average. This is nothing other than an unconditional surrender.

### Why the surrender?

This capitulation, only days after the biggest public sector strike in several decades, will appear to be a mystery and could disorient our own members. Yet it was one of the more

predictable aspects of the campaign. The largest unions in the TUC never wanted to take action on pensions. They were clearly irritated at the action taken by four unions on June 30 and were dragged kicking and screaming (or more accurately plotting and scheming) into November 30.

There are a variety of reasons for this too long to elaborate in detail here but prominent among them are chronically poor workplace organisation and leaderships which have long ago given up on collective action by ordinary members as the key strength of a union. Alongside that are unions that had never taken national action and never expected to make much more than a protest (ATL, NAHT). The fact that they are prepared to settle for quite so little may be surprising but that they would walk away without much of a fight should not be.

so-called "final" formula for public-sector pensions are talking about a further strike on the issue in late March, and more action beyond that. But activists in those unions, and especially in the officially "left-wing" unions, will have to fight hard to make sure:

- that the further strike happens;
- that it is energetically organised, and not just a limp token protest
- and that "more action" means a genuine ongoing campaign of rolling and selective action, with activity every week, rather than advice to workers to wait after the one-day protest on a promise that the union leaders, in their wisdom, may in some weeks' or months' time proclaim new activities.

The "rejectionist" unions met on 25 January. That was slow as PCS, the first "rejectionists", had been talking about a meeting since 20 December. A lot of unions attended, most sending general secretaries. That's good, but it had a downside. Unions which might otherwise have taken an initiative are now inclined to wait for a hypothetical great day when all the "rejectionist" unions, or a lot of them, concur on action; and, if we leave things to the general secretaries, that great day may never come. This downside can be seen clearly from the outcome of the January 25th meeting.

The Executive of the lecturers' union UCU had already decided to strike on 1 March. The obvious next step for the "rejectionist" unions was to come in on that date. But, so insiders tell



### What next?

The NUT has refused to agree to the Government's terms as have NASUWT, PCS, Unite and a number of other unions. That's good. These unions at least realise that there is nothing in the Heads of Agreement that meets the concerns of the hundreds of thousands of workers who took action last year and that the campaign to get these proposals withdrawn must continue. But continue how?

Unions which have not accepted the Government's

us, PCS made clear that it would not strike on 1 March, and would "consult" its members before any further action. Thus the 25 January meeting decided no action, and made no public statement. A joint meeting of the Executives of all these unions would be better.

## Why the urgency?

The pension dispute is at an absolutely pivotal point. As far as the government is concerned it is over. They are well aware that there is continuing opposition but they are confident that it is of no consequence. And it will remain of no consequence until we organise ourselves to demonstrate otherwise. At this stage inertia favours the government.

## We have not lost.

While we should recognise that the fight to defend our pensions has suffered a major setback it is also important to realise that it is not yet over and we have not yet been defeated. The unions who have refused to sign have considerable industrial muscle. The NUT and NASUWT represent the vast majority of teachers and could deliver even more effective action in schools than on June 30. A number of unions who appeared to have agreed the deal later reversed that decision when their elected bodies got to see the detail.

Time, however, is not on our side. If we want to galvanise our own

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members, unite those who haven't signed and draw the wavering unions to our side we have to announce further action as soon as possible.

Our members, the government, and the media will only really believe the talk of 'the campaign continuing' when the evidence for that stares them in the face. That means announcing our plans for co-ordinated action as early as possible this term.

# Central Foundation Girls School - fight the cuts!

Staff at CFGS had a Happy New Year welcome back to school after the Christmas holidays – the announcement of a restructure which could lead to redundancies of both teaching and support staff, an increase in teaching time and the reduction of support staff all year round contracts to term time only, resulting in a huge loss of pay.

The reason being given is that the schools budget is in trouble. One of the reasons for this is the PFI project being in deficit due to the collapse of one of the companies involved, Ballast.

## PFI Who pays?

This is not just a CFGS issue. There are 26 PFI schools in Tower Hamlets, all affected the same way and all being told that they have to contribute to the cost of the deficit out of the school's budget. Staff at Central are angry at the idea that they have to pay for this with their wages and jobs. One member of staff told us, "We didn't sign up for PFI. We did not cause the deficit. We did not cause the general financial crisis. Nor did we have any part in previous mismanagement of the school's budget. We refuse to foot the bill for all this with our livelihoods. Why would we agree to that?" Another added, "If we let this happen, the other schools will follow CFGS. We are only the first in the line. We are preparing to fight, not just for ourselves, but for the other schools in the Borough as well".

## STRIKE BALLOT

The two biggest unions in the school, the NUT and Unison, have voted almost unanimously for strike action to defend their jobs and pay. It is important that unions in other schools should prepare to support the CFGS workers and also to prepare to fight themselves in similar circumstances.

## Other Cuts

This is in the back drop of public sector cuts which in Tower Hamlets are having a devastating effect on local services. As a result of last years council budget cuts, essential services are still being closed down or cut. Journeys, the service which provides bereavement counselling for young and old is threatened with closure. CAMHS the Childrens' Mental Health unit is facing the threat of job losses reducing the service without which many people just cannot cope. In the council chamber last year, Councillor Oli Rahman described the closing of all the After School Clubs in the Borough as an opportunity for parents to spend quality time with their kids. How will he describe the slashing of CAMHS? A chance for the desperate to spend quality time with their imaginary friends?

## Link up

This year's budget is soon to be debated in the council chamber. They cannot this time tell us that front line services are safe in their hands. We know that they are not. We must fight to defend these essential services and prevent any more cuts. And we must link these fights up with CFGS and the other schools at risk.