

RTW, COR, NSSN: fight for anti-cuts unity!

The "Coalition of Resistance" (initiated by Counterfire, a group of people who recently left the SWP) called an anti-cuts conference on 27 November. "Right to Work", a campaign initiated and run by the SWP, called a "unity conference" for anti-cuts activists on 5 December, and has called an anti-cuts "convention" - also sponsored by the Labour Representation Committee - for 12 February.

Now the Socialist Party is pushing for the National Shop Stewards' Network to set up a third anti-cuts centre. There is talk of the Trade Union Coordinating Group calling a conference to set up a fourth.

The anti-cuts movement is already too vast and too varied for any one "front" to control it. Many of the important battles against cuts will be waged by unions, which of course will take their decisions through their own procedures and not on the say-so of this or that campaign centre.

Initiatives to draw together activists, create links, allow discussions, and facilitate protests have a part to play. But we must not have the movement diverted and distracted by frantic competition between different "fronts" to swing the issue of which of the various (politically more or less similar) conferences each anti-cuts group will support.

In the case of the NSSN, identifying it with one of the rival anti-cuts centres will narrow it down and cut it off definitively from its initial proclaimed objective - to create a network linking active shop stewards across union and factional lines, rather than another political competitor in left politics.

None of the "fronts" must try to substitute for the broad movement. The task of active socialists is to mobilise to transform the real labour movement and make it fight, rather than to try to use anti-cuts feeling to construct a series of miniature proprietary "new labour movements" of our own, alongside the sometimes slow-moving "big" movement.

For our own part, Solidarity and Workers' Liberty supports all the conferences and protests. We would add three points:

1. Rather than setting up a competitor group alongside COR and RTW, NSSN should approach them with a proposal for a jointly-sponsored unity conference, run by a joint organising committee

which should also be open to delegates from other anti-cuts groups. Both COR and RTW say they are for unity. Let's put them to the test.

2. All these groups — COR, RTW, NSSN, and others — should pledge to unite their efforts to build, in every area, broad, representative, democratic anti-cuts committees, based on delegates from trade union branches, stewards' committees, Labour Party organisations, and community groups.

3. Trades Councils can play a central role in initiating these committees, but the committees must be broader than existing Trades Councils. Nowhere should COR, RTW, NSSN, or other specialist groups attempt to substitute for the broad campaigns, nor should COR, RTW or NSSN people allow their respective efforts to promote their own particular front to take priority over developing the broad movement.

Strikes in April? Good. But now?

Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the civil service union PCS, announced his "April Thesis" in an article in the Guardian on 30 December and an interview with the Times the same day.

His plan is that "by March 26, the date of the big TUC march with a million people on the streets... unions [will] have balloted or [be] balloting for industrial action... followed by mass industrial action" around the time of the royal wedding at the end of April.

Although "a general strike is illegal", said Serwotka, there is no legal ban on unions coordinating action for the same day.

Internal publicity within PCS strikes a less militant note, with members recently balloted on whether they were opposed at all to worse changes in the Civil Service Compensation Scheme than those they already struck against in March 2010. But the presumption must be that Serwotka's speech reflects the thinking of the Socialist Party, which dominates in PCS officialdom.

The talk about industrial action, and united industrial action, against the Tory/Lib-Dem cuts, is good. But there is a telling difference between Serwotka's "April Thesis" and the famous "April Theses" of the Russian socialist leader Lenin, in 1917.

Lenin's "April Theses" were about what the Russian

socialists should do there and then, in April. Serwotka's "April Thesis" is about what he may do in the future if the conditions are right, in particular if other unions concur.

Joint strike action in April will be good. But workers who conclude that we don't need snacks of industrial action now because we will get a banquet in April could go hungry.

One of the two unions which Serwotka names as likely to join his April scenario — the National Union of Teachers — is already reported likely to postpone its ballot. A joint New Year's statement from the leaders of the biggest unions, Unite, GMB and Unison, geared to "making the spring elections [local government, Welsh Assembly, and Scottish Parliament polls on 5 May 2011] the first referendum on the government's austerity programme", rather than industrial action.

Serwotka's call for an April perspective may serve more to "expose" the leaders of the big unions — who will be reluctant to focus strikes just before polling day — than to produce the promised banquet.

Serwotka's "April Thesis" is a bit like the call for a general strike to bring down the government made in 1973 by Joe Gormley, right-wing leader of the then-mighty National Union of Mineworkers. Gormley said only a general strike would meet the case — in order to head off the miners from striking about pay.

As Gormley's 1973 call implied sidelining the immediate issue of pay, so Serwotka's 2011 call, focused on joint strikes against the government's cuts in public sector pensions, implies sidelining the immediate issues of cuts in jobs and services.

In fact, big cuts in local government jobs and services, and civil service jobs too, are already going ahead with the unions still focused on "write-to-your-MP" type opposition and negotiations to alleviate the impact.

The problem with Serwotka's line is not that union members are pulling at the reins to strike tomorrow, or that the general secretaries could or should decree united strike action straightaway.

There are areas where workers, even with the best union leadership, prefer to go for alleviation (voluntary redundancies, redeployment, and so on) rather than resist.

But there are areas where they will resist. Indeed, in some areas more assertive workers have already made councils back down on some cuts.

The best way for the more combative unions, like PCS, to push the more sluggish unions into action, and make possible big united strikes in the coming

months, is to encourage, nourish, publicise, cross-fertilise, and build on resistance now, everywhere that workers are up for it. That is what the unions are not doing.

The rail union RMT did the right thing by calling on all its London members to join the student demonstration on 9 December. It did the wrong thing by calling a "pause" in its industrial action over job cuts at the same time that the student mobilisations exploded.

Plan for united strikes in April? Good. But it is not a substitute for mobilising now.

The 'Loftus affair' and the left in the unions

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The behaviour of Britain's two biggest revolutionary socialist organisations where they have trade-union positions is coming to resemble more that of the old Communist Party than any of the best elements of the Trotskyist tradition both the SWP and SP claim affinity with.

Jane Loftus, President of the Communications Workers Union and the SWP's [Socialist Workers' Party's] most prominent trade unionist, recently resigned from the SWP after she supported the Interim Agreement that brought the big strike movement over jobs and conditions in Royal Mail to a halt.

The SWP's paper, *Socialist Worker*, denounced the Interim Agreement as "leaving the door open for a further wave of attacks". "Members of the SWP's central committee met Jane", so *Socialist Worker* reported (24 November), "and asked her to reflect on her position". As a result she resigned.

The SWP has recently expelled members of its Left Platform for such things as private emails to other members deemed to be "factionalising", but it did not expel Loftus.

Maybe Loftus's support for the Interim Agreement was a sudden lapse? Not so. In 2007 Jane Loftus voted against the sell-out deal that ended the major strike wave of that year, but (unlike, for example, left-wing Executive member Dave Warren) refused to campaign against the deal.

Socialist Worker denounced the deal, but did not criticise Loftus. Indeed, the *Postal Worker* paper, produced by the SWP, toned down its criticisms of the deal, compared to what *Socialist Worker* was

saying.

In December 2003, Loftus voted in favour of the "Major Change" agreement in 2003 which ushered in another round of cuts and speed-ups. She claimed the priority was "unity with the rest of the Executive"!

Again, Socialist Worker opposed the deal but did not criticise Loftus. The contradiction was resolved by a softening of the SWP's attitude in the offices.

As a postal worker reported for Solidarity back in 2003, "When SWP member, Mark Dolan was elected as Area Deliveries rep in North London a couple of years ago he promised to 'stand up for delivery members and stop Management forcing our members to take out unacceptable workloads... We should fight for no job losses, no four hour deliveries, maintaining two deliveries'. Today, Dolan is at the forefront of touting the 'Major Change' agreement around the sub offices of North London, with its 'headcount reduction', 3.5 hour delivery span and 'Single Daily Delivery'. Offices that were reluctant to help managers' plans are being encouraged to 'get involved'."

Earlier in 2003, at the peak of the movement against the invasion of Iraq, Workers' Liberty supporter Maria Exall brought an amendment to the CWU executive, calling for the union to declare no confidence in Tony Blair. It might well have passed, and caused significant political turmoil within the Labour Party.

Loftus scuppered the amendment by withdrawing the (uncontentious) motion it was attached to.

Why, when the SWP had "Blair out!" on its posters and placards? Loftus said that she had consulted with leading SWPers and been told to "maintain the unity of the left". In other words, not to embarrass CWU general secretary Billy Hayes, who was then speaking with the SWP on Stop The War platforms.

Although the 2009 Interim Agreement was widely opposed by rank and file postal workers, Jane Loftus was not quite alone on the left in supporting it. The Socialist Party's paper The Socialist ran articles backing it. Why?

It looks as if the reason lies with the SP's thinking that the way to a new workers' party lies with getting trade union officials signed up to back-room electoral projects like "No2EU". They may have hoped to get the London divisional committee of the CWU, or even assistant general secretary Dave Ward himself, in on the "son of No2EU" project for the general election.

The Socialist Party ended its Socialism 2009 rally, in November 2009, with a two-hour long series of speeches given almost entirely by trade union

general secretaries. One of these was Brian Caton, general secretary of the Prison Officers' Association, who had recently joined the Socialist Party.

While Caton is undoubtedly sincere in his socialist politics, he appears to be functioning just as he did before he joined, as a highly-paid trade-union official representing the sectional interests of prison officers, who are arguably as much agents of the violent machinery of the state, akin to police, as ordinary workers.

Again, there is a precedent: the SP's decision in October 2005 to use their control over the executive of the PCS civil servants' union to accept a wretched pensions deal that created a two-tiered pension workforce throughout the civil service, education and the NHS and scuppered a massive cross-union public sector strike to defend pensions.

In another Loftus-like episode, the two SWP members of the PCS Executive voted with the SP on that, despite Socialist Worker denouncing the pensions deal in the most violent terms.

In March the same year, Martin John and Sue Bond had voted on the PCS Executive to support calling off the union's planned strike action on pensions, jobs, and pay. Socialist Worker condemned the calling-off of the strike, and indeed in exaggerated terms, but without mentioning that SWP votes helped to bring it about.

After the October 2005 episode, the SWP Central Committee tried to call the PCS Exec members to book. Sue Bond "apologised" and was "pardoned"; Martin John refused to apologise, and resigned from the SWP.

How much was Bond's apology worth? A key factor in trashing the possibility of a united public-sector fightback in 2007 against Gordon Brown's 2% limit was the decision by PCS, although it already had a live ballot mandate for action, to withdraw into prolonged "consultations" of its membership while the POA and CWU strikes and the Unison health and local government ballots came and went.

Having "consulted" and announced that PCS members supported further national strike action, the PCS leadership then... decided to call off any further national action.

The main force driving that decision was the Socialist Party, but the three SWP members on the PCS Executive, Sue Bond and two new SWPers, also voted to call off action.

Both the Socialist Workers' Party and the Socialist Party, in the unions, have come to concentrate more and more on winning and holding high-ranking positions in trade unions, or on cementing alliances

and deals with the more leftish of the officials who already hold those positions.

The "soft-peddling" in publications like Postal

Worker, the Executive votes for sell-out deals, and the cases of Executive members acting without accountability to the political organisation, all flow from that priority.