

off the rails

Pensions: strikes can win

We applaud the firm stand taken by the leadership of the RMT and TSSA to defend our pensions in difficult circumstances. We are trying to force the same concessions out of over 100 companies for decades to come, in a climate where the pension benefits of working-class people are being disastrously eroded by employers and government alike.

This is not an easy proposition, and it will not be won with a one day strike and a settlement for some trivial concessions. We've already seen the CSEU pull out on a technicality and ASLEF pull out with their secret separate deals; and that was before even one ballot paper was posted. And now before even one day of strike action we have a press release from Bob Crow talking about a "tentative document" that proposes a railways pensions commission with an independent chair and one representative of the employers and the unions. The form is bad for this type of body: the recent government-appointed Turner Pension Commission recommended that the national retirement age be raised to 68!

Looking more closely at the press release, we see Bob Crow responding positively to the commission having an independent chair while at the same time the RMT is campaigning against an independent chair of TfL's pension fund! Why? Because the union knows there is no such thing as an 'independent' chair; he or she will represent no-one, and back the bosses. Why is the RMT's general secretary willing to accept one for the proposed commission dealing with our pensions but won't accept one for TfL's? You've also got to ask yourself who will be the one person representing all the unions on this commission, and how will they be accountable? Likewise who will represent the employers, and how can they possibly speak for all the employers, since there is no industry-wide employers' federation? Even if in the unlikely event that this commission does come up with something decent, what will bind the employers to accepting it? And finally the TSSA's general secretary has stated that such a commission were it to be capable of any success would need a representative of government on it. All in all, this document doesn't look promising.

Perhaps there is more detail in it that could put it in a more favourable light. We won't know that until we see it, so hopefully it will be available to RMT and TSSA members soon so we can all make informed decisions about the conduct of the campaign. This would distinguish these unions leadership's from ASLEF's which has kept its members in the dark and

done deals behind their back. ASLEF members should demand a special conference on this issue.

Settling this dispute is going to take a lot of talking with over one hundred companies to deal with; but should we really expect anything to come of it before we take industrial action? Look what has happened recently. The rail unions have requested talks on this matter for several months with employers and government with no success whatsoever. So what has changed? The threat of strike action, that's what. That has forced them to the negotiating table. We can reasonably hope to achieve much more if we actually go on strike.

The difficulties outlined above require us to concentrate the minds of the employers and the government who up until now have contemptuously ignored us. Now we should impose our own timetable on them, but the "threat" of strike action alone won't do this. Talking is what these people do for a living, and you can be sure that their pension needs are abundantly provided for. To get their attention and keep it we need a rolling program of strike action; nothing else will force them to make concessions.

The fear is that having got a good result in the ballot and mobilised the members, we could call off the dispute just on the basis of talks. As an alternative we should look to France, where workers and students have just forced the government to withdraw legislation that made it easier to sack young workers. They achieved this by building and maintaining the momentum of strike action and by refusing to suspend it when the government offered concessions. We should do the same.

Closer to home, local government workers are also in dispute over pensions. We should link up with them and explain to them why we are against any two-tier system like the one which was recently accepted by health workers and teachers.

We have spent months building this campaign.

We've got our four demands and we've passed the deadline for talks. Now it is time to move on to the next stage, get the "YES" vote, get the action going and build it!

Off The Rails is a quarterly pamphlet (plus one-off bulletins, like this one) written by railworkers for railworkers. It is published by the socialist group Workers' Liberty, but aims to be a platform and an organising tool for all activists who share our basic outlook. To receive Off The Rails regularly, subscribe online at www.workersliberty.org/offtherails, or send us £5 (cheques to "WL Bulletins") to Off The Rails, P O Box 823, London SE15 4NA. Phone: 07950 978 083.