

WORKERS'



LIBERTY

# workers' *liberty*

www.workersliberty.org. PO Box 823, London SE15 4NA. March 2006

## UNITE TO WIN!

**B**uild unity; reach out to other sections of the working class; organise hard-hitting action — and local government workers can win the huge battle over pensions due to open on 28 March.

The unions are moving into action — late in the day, but they are moving. One worker due to strike on 28 March reports: "I've worked in the same place for 12 years, and this is the first strike we've had in all that time. For thousands of workers, this will be their first strike and their first picket line.

Even for those who have been on strike before, this will probably be the first time that they have struck alongside so many other unions and groups of workers... It doesn't feel like a 'protest day' that we're building for the 28th".

The unions plan to follow up 28 March with week or two-week strikes by selected groups of workers, supported by a levy on all union members to cover strike pay. If union branches can campaign and organise effectively among key groups, in a position to hit councils' revenues and finances, then such action can point to victory.

It is due to be complemented by further "all-out" actions, for a day or two days at a time.

### PICKETS VITAL

**M**any workers who did not vote in the union ballots, or aren't yet in a union, or even aren't in the pension scheme, will join the union and join the action if they see the action is strong. And the way to show them that is strong picket lines.

Unions not directly involved, like the teachers' unions in schools, have issued formal instructions to their members to cross picket lines. That is because they would fall foul of the anti-union laws —



those "most restrictive labour laws in the western world" which Blair boasts about keeping in force. But many teachers' union branches are telling their members that health and safety rules should decide against opening schools without vital staff and without essential support for students with special needs, and encouraging them to tell head teachers that conscience forbids them to cross picket lines. Many schools will be closed.

### JOINT COMMITTEES

**T**he unions have already called on members to build joint union committees. It will be down to rank and file activists to make those committees as broad, as strong, and as accountable as possible.

We need not just get-togethers of top union officials at regional level, but active joint committees at the level of each local authority.

Rallies and meetings on the strike days should allow us to draw fresh new activists onto these committees alongside the established reps.

The committees can gain extra breadth by also drawing in people from pensioners' groups and other public sector unions like the teachers'.

### FRANCE SHOWS THE WAY

With their battle against government attempts to cut job security, French students and workers have shown us how to fight.

They have been able to mobilise fast because of the memory and model of November-December 1995, when a mass movement of strikes and demonstrations — with more workers *actively* involved than in the famous general strike of May-June 1968 — forced the

French government to back down on plans to cut... pensions.

"Inter-professional" committees linking workers from different sectors, regular mass meetings, and strong picketing were vital then, and are re-emerging now. We should learn from France.

### REVERSING DIVISION

**T**he local government unions start at a disadvantage because the other public sector unions — and indeed the major local government union, Unison, itself, via its health sector — agreed in October 2005 to a framework deal which got a promise of pension protection for existing workers but left new workers with worse pensions (their full-pension age raised from 60 to 65) and local government workers to fight alone.

Now there is a chance to start reversing that process of division.

The unions should declare that their fight is not just one to keep special conditions for a special group of workers, but one for the whole working class — for the right to a life after work for all workers!

# THE RIGHT TO LIFE AFTER WORK

The Turner Commission has proposed that the state pension age be raised from 65 to 69 — a move that would create great pressure to raise occupational pension ages in parallel. In Glasgow the average expectation of life for a man is... 69 years!

The unions should campaign for the right to retire at 60 on a full pension for all workers (not just those who satisfy the “Rule of 85”) and for increasing the basic state pension (the National Pensioners’ Convention reckons it needs £52.50 per week rise to bring it to the same relative value as in 1979), indexing it to average earnings, and making it available to all, without means-testing, at 60. They should demand that improved pensions be paid for by taxing the rich and capital. By doing that, they can draw millions into demonstrations and rallies alongside them.

They can also maybe even begin to open the possibility of other public sector unions restarting a fight for the right to retire at 60 of future workers. The National Union of Teachers, for example, will have motions on its conference agenda at Easter calling on the union not to agree any scheme for new starters that does not allow a full pension at 60.

## POLITICAL FIGHT

New Labour is privately blaming the Tory-majority Local Government Association for the clash. It may be true that jousting between the councils and the Government plays a part in even worse pension cuts being pushed on local government workers than on other public service workers.

Local government pensions, unlike most other public sector pensions, are paid out of funds set up by the different local authorities; and some of those funds, because of local authorities being allowed to take “contribution holidays” by the Tory government during the poll tax fiasco, are in a bad way.

The Tory local authorities have every interest in using the conflict to put pressure on central government to concede more money to local government. But the initiative for the pension cuts came from the New Labour government.

The divisions make the employers’ stance far from unbeatable. They also highlight the need for a political dimension to the campaign.

Unison Labour Link has chosen a



“lovers’ tiff” gambit — saying they won’t send the Labour Party any cheques, or organise anyone to help Labour in the 4 May council elections, until the dispute is resolved.

This passive gesture is unlikely to be effective. Unison has also talked of having another strike day on polling day, 4 May, but that is just bluff.

Instead, unions should challenge every Labour and socialist council candidate to come out openly in support of the unions’ demands. We should actively support the Labour and socialist candidates who do that, and withdraw active support from those who don’t.

The unions should also be using their ranks of union-sponsored Labour MPs! Demanding they use Parliament to obstruct and oppose the “regulations” with which the Government will have to push through its pension cuts! To date, however, while Unison has “briefed” its sponsored MPs on the local government pensions issue, it has not so much as written them a letter asking them to take bold action on it; or to vote against Blair on the hideous Education Bill; or to say that after the loans scandal, it is high time for Blair to resign.

## PUBLIC SERVICES...

Not private profit! That’s the name of a new campaign being launched on 29 March by left-wing Labour MP John McDonnell. Its first big public action will be a lobby of Parliament on 27 June.

Ten trade unions have already backed this campaign — but not the big ones most affected by the Government’s drive to privatise and “marketise” public services, like Unison, TGWU, and GMB.

Why not? In the meantime, branches of Unison, TGWU, and GMB should make good the gap by supporting the

lobby on 27 June and writing in to affiliate to the campaign.

“Public Services Not Private Profit” campaign, c/o G10 Norman Shaw South, House of Commons, London SW1A 2JF (020 7219 1626).

## SUPPORT IRAQ’S TRADE UNIONS

Iraq’s trade unions face worse than us. Decree 875 from the Shia-Islamist/Kurdish government, authorising the government to seize all their funds. Saddam’s labour laws still on the statute book, formally banning unions in the public sector.

American planes bombing, and American and British troops roaring round their streets in armoured cars. Vehement, often murderous, hostility from Al Qaeda and the other Sunni-supremacist “resistance” militias.

Yet those unions represent the hope for uniting Iraqi workers across the sectarian divides and winning a free, democratic, and secular future for Iraq.

The Iraqi left and labour movement needs the support of the left and labour movement internationally.

Check out Iraq Union Solidarity: [www.iraquionsolidarity.org](http://www.iraquionsolidarity.org).

## WHO WE ARE

**THIS bulletin is produced by local government workers who are members of the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty, an organisation fighting in the unions and the workplaces for a socialist alternative to both capitalism and Stalinism, based on common ownership and democracy. We publish a fortnightly paper, *Solidarity*.**

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**More facts, figures, and arguments about pensions on the Web: [www.workersliberty.org/pensions](http://www.workersliberty.org/pensions)**