

Not Talks But Material Gains

“They won’t talk so we must walk”. This is the slogan behind which members have taken strike actions. Throughout the dispute to date the primary focus of the PCS material outlining the objectives of the industrial action is the need to secure talks and most of the campaign leaflets simply make **a generic** reference to pensions, pay, terms and conditions.

Yet the Tory led government has not agreed to “talks” on the fundamental issues and has continued reduce pension rights, severance terms, real pay and other T&Cs. The Independent Left (IL) believes that “They won’t talk so we must walk” is wrong **as the central demand of the campaign** and that even if “talk” is attained in and of itself that will not resolve the fundamental problems facing members.

For example, the Government could “talk” as a tactic, a way of “conceding” to PCS’ main campaign demand in order to halt or derail industrial action without conceding anything of note with regard to the main areas of attack on PCS members. Its hostility since entering office and its arrogant determination to press on with retrogressive measures show that it will not move willingly on any important issue. So even if the Government talks **we will still have to win on the fundamental issues such as halting and reversing the decline in real pay**. We should therefore focus our campaign on demands such as a meaningful real terms pay increase. Indeed it is much easier to persuade members to sustain action if the campaign literature is absolutely clear as to our bargaining position and the real long term gains we are seeking. The IL believes that there has to be a change of tack in the campaign focus. Yes of course we want talks but we want talks to settle the critical issues facing members on the basis of highly specific demands which should be spelt out. Membership support for and confidence in the dispute would be strengthened if the campaign focus was switched **to the attainment of specific, key demands to protect members’ living standards, T&Cs and job security**.

There are also democratic and accountability issues here: a vague demand for talks would allow the NEC to call off the dispute on the basis of “talks” being achieved but without a single material gain for members. If that sounds unlikely we should recall that the last national pay campaign was called off by the NEC on the basis of a claimed national “breakthrough” deal with Gus O’Donnell that plainly did not exist and without a single of the campaign demands being met. To this end IL influenced branches are putting an emergency motion to the conference. We hope that it will get a chance to be debated and that you will support any call for it to be debated if the SOC opposes. The emergency motion states that the key material demands must be set out and explained in every piece of campaign literature issued to members following conference and that the outcome of any talks, good or bad, should be quickly reported back to members (instead of the usual radio silence).

Of course a change of demands, whilst important in itself, has to be matched with a change in tactics. The Independent Left has always argued that we need as much national action as possible, alongside a variety of other actions including selective action. This means raising a levy and preparing for a very long dispute. If this can be done with other unions then so much the better. But if we have to fight on our own then we have to do it seriously. A serious fight requires an explicit focus on highly specific demands and a strategy and tactics to win.

Sanctions Debate

Some controversy has been caused by the Standing Orders Committee's decision not to print motions that call on PCS to include non co-operation with benefit sanctions by members in Jobcentres as part of any industrial action. Under PCS rules, motions are not published if they could lead to legal action being taken against the Union if carried and implemented. The Union's solicitors have said that such action could lead to the Union being subject to an injunction as this would be a 'political' act and not in furtherance of a trade dispute. That, of course, may be the case depending on how any campaign was enacted, not simply from it being printed and debated.

These motions should have been printed and they should be debated. Personally I would be against voting for non co-operation at this stage on the basis that boycott is not yet deliverable: just over a quarter of DWP staff are not PCS members and whilst there is excellent support from many DWP members when there is industrial action about their 'own' issues, such as pay or pensions there are areas of relative weakness. Yet with a boycott of sanctions we are asking members to go a stage further, taking essentially political action over 'other peoples' issues that would require a higher level of organisation, understanding, confidence, and militancy.

DWP management would have no hesitation in seeking to discipline and sack individuals in an effort to intimidate members taking action. Individuals have already been sacked through the performance procedures for not achieving enough sanctions, amongst other things, and solidarity action with members facing dismissal on such grounds would enable reps to raise the wider political issues of the Tory war on welfare.

We need to get our members in a position where 1. They stick up for themselves in a more combative fight against the employer and 2. Greater numbers understand that we have more in common with claimants than we do with our managers.

However delegates would vote on a boycott of benefits, debating the issues at this Conference should be the starting point for PCS becoming a spearhead of a powerful labour movement campaign that counters the bosses propaganda on 'welfare' and seeks to end the destruction of the welfare state through mass mobilisation and militant union action

Charlie McDonald, DWP East London

Fringe meeting – Wednesday 22nd May

How do we start winning?

Old Ship Hotel, Regency Suite, Kings Rd., BN1 1NR
(turn left out of Conference centre – along the seafront)

Come along and join the discussion. All welcome.

Speakers: Pat Murphy, NUT Executive. Pat has been a key organiser of the NUT Local Association National Action Campaign (LANAC)
Christine Hulme, IL Presidential candidate
Rhys Martin, PCS Independent Socialists
Plus speaker from Civil Service Rank and File Network (invited)