

# All workers need to struggle together

**H**undreds of thousands of council workers are striking on 16 and 17 July demanding a 6% pay rise, following the example of teachers and civil servants on 24 April, and Shell tanker drivers last month. They will undoubtedly be followed by other workers, with signs of discontent among health service workers, civil servants and shop-workers.

Price rises leave workers no choice but struggle. The last 5 years - years in which the economy was supposed to be doing so well - have left the average household 15% worse off, according to a new report by Ernst and Young, with energy bills up 110%, housing costs up 45%, petrol up 29% since 2003. We are now faced with a dramatic worsening in the situation since the housing bubble started to burst last year. It is the very basics of food, fuel and housing where prices are rising fastest. In the last year 4 million households have been forced to resort to expensive short term loans or credit cards to pay their mortgages, and defaults and repossessions are likely to exceed those of the early 1990s before long.

Recession is going hand in hand with inflation. The service sector, which accounts for about 80% of jobs, shrank in May; jobs are going in the financial and construction industries. In early July 2,000 construction jobs went in 48 hours and Barratt announced 1,000 redundancies or 15% of the workforce. Official unemployment went up to 1.64 million, 5.3%, in April but it is common knowledge that this fails to take account of millions forced to claim incapacity benefit, or off benefits altogether.

Meanwhile, the rate of growth in earnings has not just failed to keep pace with inflation - it has slowed right down. This is exactly what the ruling class want. Mervyn King, Governor of the Bank of England, has said that employees should not respond to the loss of spending power by demanding pay increases as that would fuel inflation. We are told that we mustn't return to the stagflation and wage demands of the 1970s. In other words, workers should pay for the crisis, because stagflation is here whether or not we struggle for increased pay.

Much has been made of the poor handling of the situation by the Brown government but the economic crisis is not just something for Britain, it's worldwide; and it's not just Brown or King who will try and force us to accept cuts in our living standards. This is the role of the whole state machine, and not just in this country but internationally as all workers from the USA to China, France to Venezuela, face the same attacks.

## How can we fight back?

All workers have the same interest in resisting attacks on living and working conditions, but faced with a centralised attack by the state it is impossible to do so if we remain divided sector by sector. It's the same fight whether we look at postal workers last year, teachers on April 24, Shell tanker drivers last month or council workers this time. Workers recognise this every time they show solidarity. Council workers in Birmingham voted in mass meetings to support the April 24 demonstrations and strikes. In the postal workers' strike van drivers refused to cross picket lines, and there were wildcat strikes to defend them when they were disciplined. Similarly drivers from other companies refused to cross the Shell tanker drivers' picket lines. This solidarity so worried both bosses and unions that they negotiated a hasty deal in both cases.

Yet the struggles are weakened by being divided up. When the teachers and civil servants struck on April 24 it was billed as 'fight-back Thursday' for the whole public sector, but even in schools the workers remained divided - NUT members divided from NAS members, teachers in sixth form colleges divided from teachers in other

schools, teachers striking in April, other workers in the same schools striking in July. We can only respond to this by refusing to be bound by union divisions, by showing solidarity on the picket lines as in the postal and tanker drivers' strikes, and by discussing with other workers.

Workers in France showed the same tendency to struggle together last November when rail-workers and students went and spoke in each others' meetings, even if the unions didn't like it, and demonstrated together. And in 2006 it was the fact that students were starting to get together with workers that persuaded the French government to withdraw the CPE, an attack on young workers' working conditions. Back in 1980 Polish workers went on a mass strike in response to price rises, all workers together, shutting down the country, and forcing a withdrawal of the price rises, even if they had to be brought in more slowly later on.

## Solidarity cannot be organised through the unions

From *The Times* to *The Socialist* papers are speculating on a summer of discontent. Unite has joined Unison in calling its council workers out on strike, adding another 40,000 to the 600,000 who will stop work. The PCS union has sent a letter of solidarity. Unison has talked of reopening the NHS 3 year pay deal in new circumstances, and PCS is calling for a similar deal in the Department of Work and Pensions. Doesn't this seem to show union militancy? And what about Unite's merger with the American steelworkers' union? Doesn't that show that unions can organise international solidarity better than any ordinary workers on their own?

This all shows that unions are aware of discontent within the working class and the need to respond to it, but they do this in order to control struggle and not to encourage it. This time round the NUT will tell teachers to cross picket lines of learning support, cleaning and catering staff, just as Unison expected its members to cross picket lines in April. As for the PCS letter of solidarity, it is an illusion, a substitute for the real solidarity that the state has made illegal by outlawing workers striking in support of others making similar demands of other employers. The unions keep workers divided by enforcing these laws on the shop floor. The international union merger will not escape this logic, will not do anything to unite workers internationally.

Workers can only develop the force to resist the attacks on them if they unite with other workers, first and foremost by coming together across all divisions of union or job, to discuss how to resist the attacks on them. This means taking the struggle into our own hands, and not leaving it to the union 'specialists', so all workers can participate in deciding how to run the struggle. It also means uniting with other workers struggling against the same attacks in other workplaces and industries by sending delegations to other mass meetings or picket lines or demonstrations. Although this is illegal, and seems a huge step, it is the only way workers can have the strength to defend themselves, and to take the struggle further.

This is the only perspective that will enable us to really defend our living standards, and to develop the confidence to question the future that the capitalist system, with its economic crisis, its wars and its ecological disasters, has in store for us.

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