

The only answer to the attacks on pensions is the solidarity of all workers!

Public and private, young and old, temporary and permanent

The strike by council workers against attacks on pensions is taking place on the same day as the general strike in France against an attack on the job security of young workers. Thus, two of the oldest and most experienced parts of the international working class are making it clear to the ruling class that they are not willing to accept their attacks. They reject the logic of the capitalists who say that workers have to sacrifice their working and living conditions for the good of the capitalist system; that retired, employed or unemployed workers have to work harder and longer in order to shore up this decrepit system.

The council workers' strike is probably one of the biggest struggles in Britain in many years. The determination of the workers; be they young, old or retired, full time or part time is an expression of one of the most powerful weapons of the working class: its solidarity.

Rather than allow themselves to be divided against each other, they have joined together in a common struggle.

Such solidarity is the only answer to the attacks of the ruling class. Council workers, like all workers, are being told that they have to accept the loss of pension benefits, that they can retire only after 40 years of exploitation! Why? Supposedly, because too many workers are living too long, and have become a burden on the younger generation! The council workers have rejected this logic. Old and young are uniting together in the struggle, because they understand that it is the responsibility of the present generation to defend the interests of the coming generations.

In doing this they are placing themselves within an international movement which has seen workers in France, Austria and the US refusing to accept attacks on their pensions and those of their children. In 2003 public sector workers in France held massive demonstrations against attacks on their pensions, as did workers in Austria, where we saw the biggest demonstrations since World War Two. This Xmas in New York, the transit workers struck in order to defend pensions and they made it clear they were doing this for the future generations to come too.

It's not only pensions that workers have been struggling for. In 2005 car workers and other workers in Germany joined demonstrations against lay-offs at Daimler-Chrysler, whilst in Spain SEAT workers in Barcelona staged wildcat strikes against the laying off of 600 comrades. And since March students in France have been struggling against the imposition of the 'CPE', a law which means that those under 26 can be sacked at anytime during the first two years on the job. The students have gone to factories asking workers to support them, whilst hundreds of thousands of workers have joined demonstrations.

The media have only talked about 'riots' in relation to France, and some elements - encouraged by the state - have been drawn into dead-end acts of violence, but the majority have held general assemblies (AGs) where they have discussed what to do in a conscious and unified way. The most advanced AGs have invited workers to join their discussions and have gone to discuss with

employed and unemployed workers.

In Britain the media and politicians have presented the council workers as being 'privileged' and 'cushioned', compared to those in the private sector. This is a disgusting lie aimed at dividing up the working class. The reality is that all workers are seeing their pensions attacked. In the private sector workers, such as those at Rentokil have had their final salary pensions stopped, whilst 80,000 have lost their pensions totally through the collapse of firms. The same is happening in the public sector. If the bosses can impose the present attacks, they will be back for more: removing final pensions completely, reducing pensions, raising the retirement age. The Turner Report recommends that we should go on till we're 68, and that's just a start!

Workers in the private sector have also fought against these attacks. Last autumn British Gas fitters struck to maintain final salary pensions for all new workers. The attempts to divide up the working class have to be rejected.

Trade unions divide us

This division is not only carried out by the media and politicians, but also by the unions. This time last year there was talk of a public sector strike against the attacks on pensions. What happened? Nothing. Well actually, the unions did a lot. The civil service union agreed to help impose an attack on pensions that will deny all new workers final salary pensions. In the NHS Unison and others carefully buried the whole question through the device of holding further discussions with management over pensions. In the councils the unions held out the prospect of future struggles amid dark talk about other public sector workers receiving better deals. Thus, from a situation where there was great discontent through the public sector, the unions have now carved up the workforce into three groups: civil servants, health workers and council workers and are now trying to pit the council workers against the others.

The present one-day strike is part of this strategy. The unions know that council workers are furious about the attack and that they have to make a display of defending their 'members' interests. However, whilst the one day strike certainly shows that the council workers are willing to struggle, it also allows the unions to contain the workers' anger. They are also using it to divide up the council workers themselves. Not all the unions are involved in the strike; those not in the striking unions will be faced with either joining the strike illegally and facing disciplinary action, or crossing picket lines. There are many council workers who are not in a union and are thus faced with a similar choice.

This deliberate dispersal of the workers highlights the need to get together in mass meetings across union divisions, to go directly to other workplaces and sectors to discuss how to fight the attacks together. No-one will do this for us; the future is in our hands!

International Communist Current, 25/3/06.

Visit the website of the ICC! www.internationalism.org

Email: uk@internationalism.org

Write: BM Box 869, London WC1N 3XX