

# For a common struggle across all divisions

**O**n 24 April 250,000 teachers will be staging a one day strike against the government's latest pay offer. They will be joined by further education lecturers, civil servants, and council workers. Marches and rallies will be held in a large number of cities.

There are certainly any number of reasons for taking action, not only in these sectors, but right across the working class:

- below-inflation pay offers
- rising prices for basic necessities like food and fuel
- increasing unemployment, not least the 6,500 jobs under threat at the newly nationalised Northern Rock
- attacks on pensions and other benefits
- spiralling personal debts
- decline in services like health and education

All these and many other attacks on workers' living standards are being supervised or directly imposed not just by individual employers but by the state, whether in its national or local guise. Faced with a mounting economic crisis that is clearly global in scope, the national state is revealing itself more and more as the only force capable of organising the response required by the capitalist system: reducing labour costs to compete for markets and preserve profits. Therefore the state steps in to bail out failing banks in Britain and the US, forces public sector workers to accept 'pay restraint', introduces cuts in health, welfare and education (in other words, reductions in the social wage), introduces new laws reducing pensions and lengthening our working lives. And when economic competition gives way to military competition, as in the Balkans, Afghanistan or Iraq, it's the state which diverts vast amounts of social wealth into building weapons and waging war.

These policies are not the result of evil individuals or of particular governmental parties: governments of the right or the left carry out the same basic policies. In North America the Bush government extols free enterprise and presides over an economy in which 28 million need food stamps to survive. In South America, Chavez denounces Bush, talks about '21st century socialism' - and dispatches squads of 'Bolivarian revolutionaries' to suppress striking steel workers.

Faced with this centralised, state-led attack on their living and working conditions, workers everywhere have the same interests: to resist wage cuts and job cuts, to react against inroads on their social benefits. But they cannot do this by fighting separately, sector by sector, workplace by workplace. Faced with the power of the capitalist state, they need to form a power of their own, based on their unity and solidarity across all divisions into trade, union, or nationality.

After years of dispersal and disarray, workers are only just beginning to rediscover in practice what unity and solidarity mean. They need to take every opportunity to turn these general principles into practical action. If the unions are calling for strikes and demonstrations around issues of direct concern to them, as on April 24, workers should respond as massively as possible - go to the mass meetings, join the marches, take part in the pickets, discuss and exchange ideas with workers from other sectors and workplace.

## **Workers' unity cannot be organised through the unions**

But beware: the trade unions, who present themselves as the representatives of the workers, in reality serve to keep us divided.

This is nowhere clearer than in the education sector. The strike on 24 April involves the NUT members in primary and secondary education. It doesn't involve teachers in sixth form colleges who have 'different' employers. Neither does it involve teachers from other unions, such as the NAS/UWT which says the issue isn't pay, but workload. Nor does it involve thousands of education workers who aren't teachers, such as learning support assistants, site staff, cleaners, caterers etc, even though they have plenty to be aggrieved about. And though the NUT seems to be talking tough today, when many of these educational support workers came out on strike in 2006, the NUT told its members to cross their picket lines.

The same story can be repeated in the civil service, in the local authorities, on the tubes and railways, and any number of other industries where workers are divided up into different categories and unions. The state in Britain has long made it illegal for those who work for different employers to strike in solidarity with each other. By keeping workers in the framework of these laws, the unions do the work of the state on the shop floor. The same goes for the laws that forbid workers to decide on strike action in mass meetings. Union ballot rigmaroles tie workers' hands behind their backs and prevent them from making decisions as a collective force.

It follows that if we are to become such a force, we have to start to take the struggle into our hands, and not leave it in the hands of the union 'specialists'. Council workers in Birmingham voted in mass meetings to take part in the strikes around April 24. It's a good example to follow: we need to hold meetings in every workplace where all workers, from all unions or none, can take part and take the decisions. And we need to insist that decisions taken in mass meetings are binding, not dependent on ballots or private meetings of union officials.

Unity at the workplace is inseparable from building unity with workers from other workplaces and other industries, whether we do it through sending delegations to their meetings, by joining their picket lines, or gathering together at rallies and demonstrations.

Calling on all workers to assemble, strike and demonstrate together for common demands is, naturally, 'illegal' in the face of a state which wants to outlaw real class solidarity. This may seem daunting at first, too big a step to take. But it's in the very act of taking matters into our hands and uniting with other workers that we develop the confidence and courage to take the struggle even further.

And given the bleak prospects offered by the world capitalist system - a future of crisis, war, and ecological disaster - there's no doubt that the struggle has to go further. It has to go from the defence of our basic living conditions to questioning and challenging this entire social order.

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