

The beginning of struggle or just another token gesture?

Unions predict that maybe two or three million workers will be on strike on 30 November, from education, health, local government, the civil service, and more. The main issue of the strike – the future of public sector pensions – is a very real one because we are all being asked to work longer and pay more for less to retire on. And that's just for a start. In Greece existing pensions are already being cut. The logic of this system is to make us work till we drop.

And pensions are not the only issue, and it's not just the public sector. Unemployment is soaring, especially among the young: latest figures put youth unemployment at 20%. More and more young people are effectively working for nothing. It's becoming more expensive to stay on at college and go to university. Government austerity plans envisage cuts in social benefits of all kinds, and wages are also under attack: the electricians are fighting against new building industry contracts involving a 30% reduction in pay.

All this is the product of an economic meltdown which didn't just begin in 2007, which wasn't caused by greedy bankers or lazy Greeks, but is the culminating point of a world wide, historic crisis of the capitalist system. Today's deepening depression is the return of the same underlying crisis which broke out in the 1930s. And the rulers of this world have no solution to it. If they go for 'growth', it plunges them deeper into debt and inflation. If they go for 'austerity', they further reduce demand when the crisis is already a result of glutted markets.

How to fight back?

The question facing workers, students, pensioners, and the unemployed everywhere is not whether we need to resist. If we just passively accept these attacks, the bosses and the state will just come back for more. The question is how to fight back. Already this year we have had two big official days of action – 26 March and 30 June – but did they really make our rulers worried? The government has even suggested we should make do with a nice 15 minute general strike, but is a 24-hour stoppage, marshalled from start to finish by the union machinery, any more effective? In fact, such token gestures have the overall effect of sapping our energies and making us feel that we have been wasting our time.

The experience of history has shown that the ruling class only begins to take notice when the exploited class starts to take things into its own hands and unite its forces from the bottom up. And the experience of the last year or so has confirmed that there are indeed other ways of fighting back than marching from A to B, listening to some celebrity speeches, and going home.

All across the world, from Cairo to Barcelona, from New York to London, the occupation and defence of public spaces, and the organisation of general assemblies, have shown the possibility of more massive, self-organised ways of struggling. In the UK, the electricians have taken new forms of unofficial action, using demonstrations to call other workers to join their strikes and holding open mic street discussions. These movements point to the need for general assemblies in the workplaces, uniting us across trade and union divisions.

November 30 provides an opportunity for working class people from many different areas to come together, to discuss and even to put into practice the best methods for resisting the bosses' offensive. But we need to make the debate as open as possible, which means rejecting passive rallies and instead organising all kinds of public meetings where everyone can speak their mind.

And it can't all be focused on one day. We are faced with a prolonged period of crisis, and therefore with a growing assault on our living and working conditions. This is why many workers are already sceptical about what can be achieved on 30 November. Many more, faced with mounting bills or redundancies, question the usefulness of strikes and occupations. It's difficult enough knowing how to resist when your firm is about to go under. The problem is magnified a hundred times when entire national economies seem to be going down the pan.

But that emphasises that not only do we need to find better ways to fight back here and now – we also need to develop a long term perspective. The capitalist system is on its last legs and can offer us only depression, war, and ecological disaster. But the working class can use its struggles to form itself into a real social power, to develop its political understanding of the present system, and create a different future: a global community where all production is organised for human need and not the inhuman laws of the market.

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