

SOCIALIST APPEAL

The Marxist voice of the labour movement

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DONATION



TORIES OFFER 1%!

REJECT WAGE CUTS!

UNITED ACTION TO DEFEAT TORIES

The leaked government wage offer of an average 1% represents a real wage cut for millions of workers in the public sector. With inflation likely to rise to 5-6% next year this offer will result in significant cuts in living standards. Some sections will be faced with a wage freeze.

This means local authority workers are facing their greatest ever crisis. The Tory government, as well as the already planned cutbacks in the public sector, now want to make them one of their chief scapegoats in their attempt to restore "confidence" in their economic policies. The budget deficit must be reduced, they say. This will mean even more cuts and job losses.

But already jobs and services have been cut to the bone. We cannot accept any more! Major and his

government are already on the ropes - now is the time to organise a successful united fightback.

Throughout London, thousands of NALGO members have taken action against the attacks. Strikes and disputes have already taken place in Newham, Islington, Hackney, Camden, Tower Hamlets, Greenwich, Hammersmith and Haringey. Now the action needs to be widened.

Council workers have been hit with attempts to bring in compulsory redundancies, job cuts, downgradings and attacks on union organisation. More attacks are in the pipeline: the extension of compulsory competitive tendering into "white collar" services and the implementation of the council tax. According to the INDEPENDENT (3.11.92), "the fierce capping planned to try keep council tax bills

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THE TIDE HAS TURNED

"The most astonishing thing is that the forward march of Thatcherism should be halted in the coalfields, of all places.....the worm has turned, the fox has been shot and the straw has broken the camel's back. The long night seems to be over. We know that we stand at a pivotal moment in the politics of the 1990s." (Guardian 17.10.92)

The past month has seen a dramatic change in the political situation in Britain. It was only six months ago that Tory leader John Major triumphed in the general election - the Tories fourth consecutive victory. Now Major's government is reeling from crisis to crisis. His popularity rating is down to only 16% - the lowest ever recorded for any prime minister.

Since "Black Wednesday", 16 September, when the government was forced to pull out of the ERM and, in practice, devalue the pound, their economic policy has been in tatters. Unemployment has officially reached nearly 3 million, one in ten of the workforce, and is forecast to rise at least another half million over the next twelve months. Day in, day out, we hear of more closures, more bankruptcies and more redundancies. Rather than emerging from the recession, as Major promised during the election campaign, Britain has gone deeper and deeper into the longest and worst recession for sixty years. "Vote for us on Thursday," they said, "and the recovery will continue on Friday." But now the British economy seems almost on the verge of slump.

Then, on 14 October, Michael Heseltine, trade and industry secretary, announced the virtual closure of Britain's coal industry, with the destruction of 31,000 jobs. This has

been the catalyst which has transformed the whole situation. On Wednesday 21 October, 200,000 workers joined the NUM demonstration and lobby of parliament. On Sunday 25 October, over 300,000 marched on the TUC demonstration against pit closures and government economic policy. These were overwhelmingly demonstrations of organised labour - the biggest since the early 1970s.

The election of 9 April represented the victory of "hope over reality." As we explained in *Socialist Appeal*, wide layers of the middle class and even sections of the working class believed that the recession was only a temporary blip on the upward curve of economic prosperity. For these sections real incomes had increased by one third over the course of the 1980s. Now, these illusions have evaporated as the true depth of the economic crisis facing Britain has dawned. Even the normally loyal Tory media has turned on the government. Newspapers like the Daily Mail and Daily Express, once ardent Thatcherites, have changed from gamekeepers to poachers.

This huge movement of revulsion against the closure of the coal industry and, in particular, the reemergence of organised labour, have put the Tories into open retreat and crisis. On one day they said there was no alternative, the next day they "reprieved" 21 of the pits when Heseltine announced a moratorium and review of their closure. Although this was enough to win back the support of a few rebel Tory MPs who threatened a defeat for the government in the parliamentary debate, it has done nothing to quell the growing protests against the whole policy of the Tories. People see the retreat as nothing more than an attempt to play for time.

After this came Major's "retreat" on economic policy. Within hours of Chancellor Norman Lamont saying the government's main priority was still the fight against inflation, Major had to go live on TV and state that now the priority must be given to economic growth and employment.

In the midst of this shambles, government ministers have talked about a wage freeze in the public sector and big cuts in government spending. Last week a government

report on London's hospitals has recommended the closure of five of the countries biggest hospitals with the loss of 20,000 jobs.

The formerly loyal Tory press now openly ridicules Major and his government. The Tory "Times" has even published an article claiming that Major "cracked up" during the crisis over ERM. He has been living on junk food, started dyeing his hair, is completely isolated and is becoming increasingly paranoid. Of course the "Times" would rather believe that the Tories problems are more to do with Major's personal inadequacies than with the dire state of the British economy and the massive discontent growing throughout the country.

Now another crisis has hit the beleaguered Major. With the possibility of defeat in the parliamentary debate on Maastricht, he has talked of making it an issue of "confidence", and there have been hints of an election being called. Speculation is now rife on Major's future. The only thing in his favour is that his main contender for leader of the party, Michael Heseltine, is now probably even more unpopular than himself. Heseltine has been "transformed into the problem, not the solution," according to the Guardian.

It now seems an eternity since the post-election days, when the Tories were proclaimed as invincible as the permanent party of government.

Only a few weeks have passed since the TUC and Labour Party conferences. This was clearly the high tide of the rightward shift in the movement. At the TUC conference we even had the spectacle of the leader of the CBI being invited to speak for the very first time.

But there has been a qualitative change in the situation. In the course of a few days the Tories and the desperate economic crisis they are presiding over have been exposed. The labour movement has emerged from the long years of setbacks. Now, not only struggle, but victory is on the agenda.

"We are back in step with the Jarrow March. If he is in any doubt about the political stakes, John Major should have a word with Ted Heath." (Guardian 17.10.92)

END HEALTH SERVICE CRISIS

Health Secretary Virginia Bottomley has welcomed the Tomlinson Report into the London health service, whose recommendations could mean 20,000 job losses. The Report recommends the closure of St Bartholomew's, the Middlesex, CharingCross, Queen Charlotte, the Royal Ear, Nose and Throat, and the Hospital for Tropical Diseases. Also proposed is the merger of St. Thomas' and Guy's Hospitals onto a single site.

The Tories claim there are too many hospital beds, yet there are 150,000 people on waiting lists in the capital. Beds are closing from underfunding not from underuse.

NUPE have carried out a survey amongst 1000 nurses. Over half of them stated that staffing levels were inadequate, and that staff shortages were primarily due to 'underfunding or other financial problems'. The nurses described 'a climate of despair and frustration in the health service'. Half of those surveyed had considered leaving the NHS during the past year.

The Government's market system in the NHS is bringing it to further crises. 'Long waiting lists, poor primary and community care health services and an inadequate ambulance service are all products of persistent and long standing underfunding', said NUPE London Officer, Chris Humphreys.

The Tories' worship of the market comes before our health. Again, there will be several months of 'consultation', as the Government does not officially comment on the Report till the new year, but the labour movement will need to take action to force the Tories to retreat. □

STOP HOSPITAL CLOSURES

The recently released Tomlinson Report into the future of London's Health Service, bad as it is, should not be considered totally in isolation from the Government's overall strategy towards the public sector.

Civil Servants, local Government Officers, teachers and now Health care workers will be the ones facing the brunt of attacks as the Tories try to reduce public spending in an attempt to get out of the present economic crisis.

Already the trend is moving towards the breakdown of national pay agreements and the imposition of local bargaining coupled with personal assessments and performance related pay.

In the Health Service this is being made easier by the creation of the internal market and of autonomous 'self governing trusts' that have the ability (although

not generally used as yet) to set their own pay and conditions.

The feeling is that as competition for patients become more fierce Trusts will be seeking to completely revamp

their workforces' pay and grading structures to become more efficient and reduce the overall wages bill.

Tomlinson, therefore, can be seen as a device not just to reduce the number of hospitals and beds in London in order to save resources, but to aid this re-organisation.

The number of closures and mergers proposed would, if carried out even partially, provide Health managers in the city with tens of thousands of trained, qualified and desperate workers all entering into a scramble for the 'new jobs' available. At a stroke they would have the ability to impose whatever staffing and pay levels they could get away with.

It is possible that the report will not be adhered to in full and that a cosmetic climb down will occur, but it is just as likely that this will be done on the basis of staff voluntarily agreeing to changes in their conditions.

Such a partial climbdown has been made easier by the likes of David Blunkett, opposition spokesperson on health, who has 'conceded' that some hospitals must go.

Health workers are not necessarily against re-organisation, mergers or even in some cases closures. What we are against is this being done on the basis of cutbacks and a general reduction in the level of services provided.

We would want a strategic regional body, composed of members of staff groups, unions, Community Health Councils and local authorities, etc. to conduct detailed research into the city's needs and to devise a regional plan to ensure a more evenly available and expanded Health Service for the people of London, and not the kind of vague document produced by Tomlinson.

Health workers are, I think, waking up to the fact that the 'good old days' of regular pay rises, pay review bodies, national bargaining and job security are now at an end, and that it is only with strong organisation on our part that we can protect our jobs and conditions, as well as our service as a whole.

The recent mass protests over the Government's employment record can together with the Tomlinson Report mark the beginning of a concerted campaign by all public sector workers to defend the country's vital services.

ROYAL MARSDEN HOSPITAL WORKER

NALGO : CLEAR STRATEGY NEEDED

There was a much better response than many expected for the national strike action by Nalgo members in Polytechnics (now universities). Health service unions have been demonstrating against cuts. The local government branches in the front line of Tory attacks, particularly Hackney and Islington, have been calling to link up the different campaigns against the cuts.

NALGO Metropolitan District (London) called a day of action against Public Sector cuts. This is a good start. Unfortunately Hackney has not been given 'authorisation' by the national emergency committee, despite voting at their recent AGM to strike. Similarly Polytechnics and 'new universities' NALGO members have been told that they must ballot to support the lecturers strike as well as the day of action.

The attacks on the Health service, Local Government and Education sectors are now being stepped up. A clear strategy to fight the cuts must be implemented. A one-day strike should be organised immediately across London, linking up all of the sectors under attack or in dispute. Support must be built with all of the other unions in the firing line. With the ballot for merger of NALGO, NUPE and COHSE imminent there should already be closer rank and file solidarity which must be built on.

Since 'Black Wednesday' when the Tories were exposed as being incompetent. There has been a change in attitude amongst many workers. A belief that we have to fight back and we can win. There has rarely been a better opportunity to defeat the plans of the Tories. A national lead needs to be given. NALGO must link up the disputes. Support could be mobilised firstly for a one-day London wide strike of Local Government, Health service and new universities, linking all these actions. Then national strike action could be organised. NALGO members under attack over pay, jobs or conditions see that we have the opportunity of being in the forefront of a campaign to defeat the Tory government and stop the attacks on the public sector services our members provide. This could be the beginning of a winter of discontent, bringing the end of 13 years of Tory government.

DAVE CONWAY (Met District NALGO EC)

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CONT. FROM FRONT

down is likely to force job cuts." This is what the Tories are planning for local authority workers!

Trade unionists should demand that all Labour controlled authorities should refuse to implement any more cuts; we should fight for the restoration of pre-1979 public sector funding levels. We must campaign for an end to Compulsory Competitive Tendering and the return of all contracted out services to the public sector.

All areas of the public sector are under attack: the Tomlinson report advocates the closure of five of London's big hospitals with the loss of 20,000 jobs. Local government, education, health, transport: nothing is safe under this Tory government. Coordinated regional and national action must be organised.

A London wide meeting of stewards from all the public sector unions should be convened to initiate such action - we need an all London Day of Action against these attacks, a 24 hour strike, demonstration and rally should be organised.

The working class are facing an avalanche of redundancies and attacks from the employers and the government. The two massive demonstrations in support of the miners have shown the change in mood that has taken place. If we organise now we can turn back the Tory attacks. Trade unionists must call on the TUC to organise a 24 hour general strike as the beginning of a campaign to force the Tories out. We should raise the demand for a general election now and the return of a Labour government committed to real socialist policies.