

Socialist Equality Party responds to PCS union's "There is an Alternative" campaign

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Simon Walker is the Socialist Equality Party candidate in local elections held today for Walkley in Sheffield. He was asked by email to support the Public and Commercial Service Union's (PCS) five point pledge, which is advanced as an "anti-cuts" platform. His reply is published on the PCS Yorkshire and Humber Region web site.

The Socialist Equality Party rejects entirely the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's austerity measures. We say that the assault on jobs, wages, working conditions and essential social provision must be met with the mass mobilisation of working people to bring down the coalition and replace it with a workers' government that will reorganize the economy based on social need, not private profit.

It is because of my opposition to the government and its measures that I cannot endorse the five point pledge drafted by the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) leadership. To put the matter bluntly, the PCS is not interested in such a fightback.

The five pledges reference the defence of "universal welfare provision", "public sector pensions" and public services generally as part of the PCS's "there is an alternative campaign".

What does this alternative amount to? The PCS says it "prioritises the closure of the tax gap" and "investment in jobs and public services" against spending cuts. This sounds all well and good. But the PCS states that this policy "offers the new government an alternative to public sector cuts".

This is an appeal to the Tories and Liberal Democrats to work with the union, rather than a fight to mobilise workers and young people against the government.

In claiming that the government can be persuaded to act differently, the PCS is perpetrating a fraud against

its own members. The government has made clear where it stands. It is cutting Corporation Tax and has given the banks free rein to pay themselves millions. There is to be no real regulation of the City of London and the financial institutions and no one is to be held to account for the near destruction of the British and world economy through their reckless and criminal speculative activities.

In addition, PCS Pledge Three makes clear that the union is not opposed to all cuts. Instead, it calls for Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) tests to be carried out on any proposed policy. Citing the majority presence of women workers in the public sector, the PCS advances the EIA as a means of ensuring that their impact falls equally on men and women.

This divisive policy has already been used to terrible effect. The Single Status agreement was supposedly aimed at remedying poor pay for women. Instead, in the vast majority of cases, "equality" regrading has led to a lower pay scale being implemented for both men and women. In Leeds, 600 workers employed in refuse collection, street cleansing and waste management took strike action in September 2009 against the efforts of Leeds City Council to cut their wages by up to £6,000 a year on the spurious pretext of this regrading scheme.

Elsewhere admin staff, teaching assistants and others have lost up to one-third of take-home salary in some cases.

In this instance, as in every other, it is the action of the PCS and the Trades Union Congress—not its words—that makes clear where the unions really stand.

In the year since the government came to power, the TUC has organised just one national demonstration, while strikes remain at historic lows. Some 120,000 jobs have gone in the public sector over the past year and only in March; local authorities arbitrarily imposed

new contracts on some 170,000 workers under threat of dismissal. What did the unions do? Nothing.

The PCS and the TUC routinely hold out Labour as the alternative to “ConDem” government cuts. But it was Labour that bailed out the bankers and began to impose austerity measures. Labour leader Ed Miliband has said that public spending cuts are necessary. Accordingly, it is Labour councils up and down the country that are slashing jobs, wages and conditions.

If Labour took control of Sheffield, nothing would change. The Labour Party had the opportunity to defeat council leader Paul Scriven and the Liberal Democrats cuts agenda in the recent budget round. But Labour councilors abstained in the vote. Not only did they allow the cuts to pass, they offered to work with the Liberal Democrats to reduce the council’s budget.

We say there is an alternative to austerity but it can only be achieved by the independent political mobilisation of the working class against the parties of big business. It means building rank and file committees in the workplaces and neighbourhoods to challenge the collusion of the trade unions with the government and the building of a new socialist party.



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