UK pseudo-left covers for unions' public sector pensions betrayal

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British pseudo-left groups are seeking to cover for the trade unions' capitulation to the government's assault on public sector pensions.

On November 30, more than two million public sector workers struck against government plans to make them pay more, and work longer, for reduced pensions. Within weeks, the Trades Union Congress Public Sector Liaison Group (PSLG) announced it was suspending any further action and had accepted the "Heads of Agreement" (HofA) for the four main pension schemes within the public sector.

The outline agreement, which accepts all the governments' parameters, was endorsed last week by the executive of the main public sector union, Unison. Together with the GMB, it hopes to railroad the deal through the health service, local government, and education.

The Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) have organized lobbies and meetings, claiming that the Trades Union Congress could be pressured to reverse its betrayal. They present the minority of unions—the Public and Commercial Services (PCS), Unite and the National Union of Teachers (NUT)—as honourable exceptions continuing the fight. But while they have so far refused to sign up to HofA, all the unions are complicit in the scheme-specific approach to negotiations that has facilitated the TUC's divide and rule policy. They too have refused to call further strike action, claiming the government is open to negotiation.

The SP and the SWP insist these unions must lead the fight to demand the TUC set a date for further strikes. The meetings they have held are gatherings of trade union executives and lower ranking officials—mainly SWP and SP members—aimed at maintaining the fiction that a broader section of the union bureaucracy is opposed to a sell-out. They engage in double book-keeping, presenting these events as movements of the rank-and-file.

Writing in the SP newspaper, *The Socialist*, Hannah Sell reported on a meeting held by the PCS Left Unity group on January 7. Conscious of widespread hostility to the deal, she wrote opposing any struggle against those who have betrayed. "Breaking the united front on pensions will lead, inevitably, not only to anger but to confusion and some demoralisation among a layer of Unison activists and other workers," she declared. This could even mean workers would leave the union in disgust and "look for other means of fighting back."

Such a necessary development is anathema to Sell. To counter it, she calls for "building rank-and-file organizations" and "fighting, democratic unions."

"Unlike the leadership of New Labour, even the most right-wing union leaders are susceptible to pressure from their members, whose dues ultimately pay their salaries," she insists. Their course can either be reversed by "significant numbers of workers" demanding "special sectoral conferences to discuss the deal, and for a ballot to take place immediately," or the leadership replaced.

In the hands of the SP, the term "rank and file" is a cover for a section of the union bureaucracy acting to keep the working class penned into organizations that have abandoned any defence of their members and the working class.

At the Left Unity rally, PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka denounced "senior trade union officials" for accepting the government's terms. But he pointedly did not name any names. He urged a campaign for unity, insisting that setting new dates for strike action was pre-emptive until you knew who else would take part—whether there were millions or only hundreds of thousands.

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Chair Janice Godrich, PCS president and a member of the Socialist Party, demanded that the resolution passed by the meeting should be as "uncontroversial" as possible. This meant omitting any criticism of the TUC. The meeting merely declared its rejection of the HofA while calling on the "negotiating unions to maintain the united front."

It concluded by urging the TUC's PSLG to organize another strike. Only if this was not forthcoming should those unions prepared to "consider" continuing the defence of pensions hold their own meeting. An amendment sponsored by the SWP called for a date to be set for strike action by the PSLG, but even this toothless gesture was rejected.

Unsurprisingly, a lobby of the PSLG the following Thursday organised by the SP and SWP was a non-event with only 100 in attendance. The TUC meeting concluded with the major unions agreeing to proceed with the HofAs, while all those who had yet to sign up set no further dates for strike action.

An SWP meeting the next weekend continued in the same vein. A statement of "Unite the Resistance" avoided any outright criticism of the TUC. An amendment referred to "grassroots co-ordination and rank and file conferences in every union and across the unions, prepared to take action in the event of a sell-out", as if the sell-out had not already happened.

Genuine rank and file bodies, independent of the unions, are the last thing the pseudo-left wants. The meeting instead called for a coalition of the "rejectionist" unions to build "effective opposition through further strike action."

The lead role in the "rejectionist" movement is meant to be played by the PCS. However, Serwotka—again the featured speaker—once more argued against the need to "name a day and name it quickly".

Events of the week didn't lend themselves to clarion calls, he said. You couldn't just use the same slogans as "when there were 30 unions involved." Thursday's TUC meeting was "grim and ritualistic," but it would be wrong to attack other union leaders, as "calling it like it is might leave us [PCS] in a minority".

Fully six weeks after the Day of Action, and a month since the TUC-organised sabotage of the dispute, Serwotka said it was necessary to "pause for thought".

The PCS has in fact been invited back into negotiations with the government, after being barred earlier for refusing to agree the HofA. Reporting the invitation, the *Socialist Worker* said it had been "hailed as a victory by many" at the "resistance" meeting.

The SWP make no account as to why the PCS involvement in talks with the government should be celebrated, or what this has to do with leading "effective opposition" to the TUC betrayal. The government has made it clear that all negotiations will be based upon the HofA, which accepts the framework of its attacks on pensions.

From the outset, the Socialist Equality Party has explained that the trade unions are bitterly opposed to any genuine struggle against the attacks on public sector pensions or any other aspect of the government's austerity programme. We warned that their sole aim in calling the one-day stoppage on November 30 was to let off steam while they prepared a betrayal behind the scenes.

The pseudo-left groups seized upon the November 30 stoppage as proof of the revival of the trade unions as organs of class struggle. Under conditions in which such hollow claims have been exposed through the bitter experiences of millions of workers, they continue to act as the last line of defence for the TUC and its affiliates.

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