

UK local elections: Labour Party and trade unions facilitate government cuts

Stephen Woodbridge
30 April 2012

The following statement has been issued by Stephen Woodbridge, the Socialist Equality Party's candidate for the Bretton North ward of Peterborough in local elections on May 3.

Since 2006, the Conservative-run Peterborough City Council has imposed cuts worth £100 million. This year they will total £28 million, with a further £14 million planned in 2013.

Labour Party candidates in Peterborough claim to be against the cuts. Darrell Goodliffe, author of the Peterborough Blog on Labour's web site, writes of his dismay at the council's latest budget. Yet up and down the country Labour Councils are imposing cuts just as savage as the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Moreover, in councils where it is in opposition such as Peterborough, Labour has not lifted a finger to mobilise against austerity.

Labour's manifesto for the May 3 council elections makes no commitment to overturn the cuts or reverse privatisation, saying only that they intend to "restrain the excesses of the Tory council."

The pledge that "We would aim to avoid using any contracted companies who do not pay their employees a living wage" is typical of the weasel words that litter the manifesto.

In factories, council depots and offices, the trade unions have verbally deplored cuts while accepting them in practice and ensuring opposition is stifled. They assisted the Conservative Council in pushing through the 2011 budget, which led to the loss of hundreds of jobs and the wholesale privatisation of public services.

When the 2012 budget cuts were announced, Mike

Doherty, regional organiser for the Unite union, gave an interview to the *Evening Telegraph*. He proposed nothing other than that people urge Conservative MP Stewart Jackson to make "representations" to the government for a "fairer settlement."

Clearly, Doherty has never looked at the web site of the Peterborough Conservatives where Jackson regularly expresses his delight at the government's slash and burn policies.

In the same article, UNISON Regional Organiser John Toomey went so far as to express his sympathy for Tory councillors, declaring, "I think the council has done what it can with the budget but the government keeps moving the goalposts. I think what we are seeing now is that the trimming of excesses has already happened in the last year so now we are seeing cuts that will have a real impact on services."

Conservative council members have leapt to the defence of the trade unions, pointing out that they could not have pushed through budget cuts, pay freezes and privatisation of local services without them. They did the same when the Trade Union Reform Campaign, a right-wing Tory front, criticised the council for funding two union official posts and an office.

Following these criticisms, the unions have bent over backwards trying to show that these subsidies give value for money. On April 12, UNISON national secretary for local government, Heather Wakefield, wrote on the Public Finance web site that union reps save councils billions of pounds a year. She praised Conservative and Labour councils alike for their "good sense" in funding union officials and singled out Peterborough—where because the council has been "building positive relations" with the unions, "we have been able to effect change to date without litigation or industrial action/unrest."

She concluded by citing favourably Labour MP John Healey, who said unions are a “valuable component of the Big Society” and that they “are often all that stands between employers and anxious and angry employees. They absorb the flak ... and negotiate the ‘reconfiguration’ that generally follows downsizing.”

I have been asked several times in the election campaign: What is the difference between the SEP and other organisations that call themselves socialist? In Peterborough, as elsewhere, these other organisations are either fully integrated into the Labour Party, or, like the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), act as cheerleaders for the trade union leaders.

Ron Graves, Labour candidate for Stanground Central ward and president of the Peterborough Trades Council, is typical of the breed. He uses left rhetoric that few within the party apparatus would agree with to sell workers rotten goods. He attempts to shore up Labour’s shattered authority after it has bailed out the banks, launched colonial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and attacked democratic rights by promising things that Labour will never deliver.

TUSC is standing a candidate, Mary Cooke, in Orton Longueville. This group exists solely to divert opposition to the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats back behind Labour, which they claim will be more “vulnerable to trade union pressure”. TUSC says that there will be “Labour” and “non-Labour” candidates standing in the general election “who agree with our policies” who will be supported by “left and Labour movement organisations participating in our coalition.”

In one breath the manifesto declares, “When faced with government cuts to council funding, councils should refuse to implement the cuts,” but in the next gives them a get out, saying, “We will support councils which in the first instance use their reserves and prudential borrowing powers to avoid passing them on” while setting a budget and demanding that “the government makes up the shortfall.”

Only the Socialist Equality Party speaks for the independent interests of the working class. We say an international socialist programme is required to transform society based on the needs of the vast majority of mankind.

This requires the implementation of socialist policies to reorganise economic life on the basis of social need, not private profit, so that everyone can enjoy a secure

job, decent living standards, education, health care and an income in retirement or ill-health.

If I am elected, I pledge to fight for the interests of workers and young people on every question—housing, education, rents, benefits, jobs. It is high time that there is such a party to challenge the parties of big business—Labour included—and trade unions that work exclusively to paralyse and betray working people.



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