Socialist Party defends betrayal of UK pension dispute

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The decision of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) to abandon a planned strike to defend public sector pensions has caused extreme embarrassment to the Socialist Party.

Not only does the SP have key figures on the PCS executive who backed the decision to call off the strike. But it is in alliance with numerous other pseudo-socialist and Stalinist groups in the Left Unity faction, which in turn works with PCS Democrats, a smaller group that includes various Labourites and a Liberal Democrat local councillor. As the Democracy Alliance, they collectively enjoy a sizeable majority on the executive. There are only three members drawn from the officially designated right wing on the 40-plus committee.

The SP has, in addition, boosted the PCS and its general secretary, Mark Serwotka, as the type of "fighting union" and militant union leader the working class needs—proof of the continued role of the unions more generally in supposedly defending their members.

The PCS was advanced as the head of a group of "rejectionist unions", who opposed the decision of the larger public sector unions such as the GMB and Unison to end all opposition to government plans to double employee contributions and the switch to the lower index of inflation for public sector pensions.

After months of inaction, the PCS and others held entirely unnecessary "consultative ballots" to re-endorse a decision to strike that had already been agreed. It secured a massive majority in favour, 90 percent to reject the latest offer and 72 percent to strike. Finally, March 28 was set as a date for strike action.

The PCS was to be joined by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the University College Union (UCU). But the NUT pulled out of its commitment, and it and the UCU decided instead on a London-only strike so as to cover the backs of the "lefts" in these unions.

Instead of opposing this betrayal, on March 19, the PCS executive used it as an excuse to call off the planned national strike. Those voting to do so included SP members Janice Goldrich, the PCS president; John McInally, vice president; and Chris Baugh, assistant general secretary—as well as executive members Mark Baker, Kevin Greenway, Emily Kelly, Marion Lloyd and Chris Morrison.

The PCS Left Unity National Committee issued a statement justifying the decision. Worse still, Left Unity refused to advocate any struggle against those it identified as authors of a betrayal, such as the NUT. It noted that the executive had "unanimously agreed that PCS must continue to work with other unions to build for national coordinated action at the earliest possible opportunity and before the end of April if possible."

This type of political sophistry has not convinced many workers within the PCS or other trade unions. The SP clearly feels itself compromised and its hollow claims regarding the trade unions undermined. This is the only possible explanation for the transparent political apologia by SP general secretary Peter Taaffe, published April 18 in the *Socialist*, headlined, "The pension battle continues".

In it, Taaffe warns of the "Herculean efforts of working people" being wasted of the trade union movement was "now to evacuate the scene of battle without deploying its full strength".

But this has already taken place—from 20 unions initially, to action by the PCS, only the health workers within UNITE, Nipsa in Northern Ireland, and some RMT members.

A refusal to strike, he says, "would have serious consequences for the struggle against the panoply of cuts, more than 90 percent of which have yet to be

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introduced."

If that is the case, what then of the PCS's decision regarding March 28 in weakening the anti-cuts struggle? This is all blamed upon the NUT, whose decision he insists, "made it impossible for the PCS to call on its members to come out in a national strike…."

Taaffe insists, "It was correct for the PCS not to proceed with the national strike action on 28 March, because it did not have a full mandate for such action."

This is a lie. There was an expectation of action by other unions, but this was by no means a precondition for a PCS strike.

Of course, this could still be portrayed as a question of tactics, however incorrect, were it not for the SP's refusal to call for any struggle to be waged against the union bureaucracy. Taaffe writes of the NUT having a "nominally left leadership" and notes that its Easter conference has planned no concrete action. But he concludes, "There is, however, still an opportunity of drawing teachers into national strike action at the NUT's recall national executive committee meeting in April. A successful outcome of the pension struggle depends upon the NUT, together with the PCS and UCU leaderships, deciding now for national strike action, perhaps on 10 May."

For Taaffe, everything still depends on the union leaderships, not a struggle by the working class against these traitors.

In fact, all too predictably, when the NUT executive met, not only did it not support national strike action on May 10. It also ruled out regional action on May 10 and voted against reaffirming a conference decision for strike action some time in June.

Taaffe insists that national strike action must be fought for by the PCS because "The situation has now changed. The government is putting the boot in, refusing to negotiate with the unions on the retirement age, the rate of contributions, etc."

But all of this could have been said at any time in the past year. The government has been able to proceed with its offensive because the unions have placed a straitjacket on their members.

May 10 has only been decided on as a day for combined action because Unite took the decision to call out its 100,000 health service workers separately, having ruled out taking part in the planned joint action on March 28. The fact that the PCS has announced its decision to participate alongside them and the UCU alters nothing fundamentally. Such selective stoppages, even when held under the guise of joint action, only serve as a cover for the unions to pursue separate negotiations on a scheme specific basis.

Taaffe knows very well what will follow. He writes, "After national action, in co-ordination with other unions, it may be necessary for carefully organised group action—helped and sustained by those who are not on strike—to force the government back to the negotiating table on the key issues. But to abandon national action now could fatally undermine the programme of group and sectional action."

What does this mean? There will be a limited national strike on May 10, as a sop to the many workers who are angry at the inaction of their unions. But after this token gesture, the SP will dutifully endorse the regional and sectional protests, organised by the various unions with the sole aim of neutering the pension dispute and run it into the ground. But other unions are moving away from action. The Unison union has declared that it will not call any further strikes in the NHS.

A genuine fight against the attacks on public sector pensions can only be prepared through a rebellion of the working class against the trade unions and the building of a new socialist leadership and new organisations of class struggle. But the NUT is not the only organisation with a leadership that is only "nominally left". The Socialist Party is implacably hostile to any movement of the working class that challenges the grip of the union bureaucracy because a sizeable portion of its own leadership is made up of members of that same privileged and corrupt club.

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