

UK local elections: SEP candidate speaks at PCS union's question time

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Socialist Equality Party candidate for Bretton North Stephen Woodbridge was invited by the Public and Civil Servants (PCS) union Eastern Region to a candidate question time, "United for the alternative". Other candidates present were the Labour Party's Ron Graves, Mary Cooke of the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC), Fiona Radic of the Green Party, Liberal Democrat Nick Sandford and Fran Fox, United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

Prior to the event, the PCS sent candidates a letter asking them to endorse their campaign over pensions.

In his reply, Woodbridge wrote, "The PCS has defended nothing... [It] called off the March 28 national strike. It has called another on May 10, and promised one in June, only to defend its tattered reputation among its members. The general trend remains one of token strikes involving ever smaller numbers, as one union after another makes ready to do a deal with the government. The PCS deserves no support. Public sector workers should instead rely on their own initiative and begin to organise outside of and against the PCS."

The question time session was a further effort to defend the PCS's shop-soiled reputation. The only questions allowed were prearranged.

Candidates were given two minutes to introduce themselves. Woodbridge explained that the SEP "rejects entirely the Conservative and Liberal Democrats governments' austerity measures. The attack on jobs, wages and pensions, and essential social services must be met with a mass mobilisation of working people to bring down the coalition and replace it with a workers government that will reorganise the economy based on social need not private profit."

He continued, "To put the matter bluntly, the PCS is not interested in such a fight back; to call it a campaign is an abuse of the English language." It makes amorphous pledges, "about 'fair play' and a 'living wage' and 'fair pensions for all' and 'Quality public services'... But what does the PCS propose? A pathetic call on the government to protect pensions and the hope that MP's can be made to do the right thing."

Responding to one of the set questions on decent pensions, Woodbridge explained, "Recently day care for the elderly in Peterborough was increased from £2 a day to £24 a day—that will wipe out most peoples' pensions. It means a lot of the elderly that receive essential day care will have to go without. There's no question that all parties that are committed to such austerity measures... The Labour Party was the first to bail out the banks. That's their record."

Woodbridge also raised the record of the Greens in imposing cuts in Brighton, where they are the largest party in the council and in countries such as Ireland and Germany where they have taken a role in government.

Candidates were asked what they would do to support PCS strikers on May 10 and a possible follow-up strike in June "if the government still refuse to come to even just to negotiate on things".

Woodbridge responded first, stating, "In this instance, as in every other, it is the actions of the PCS, not its words that makes clear what it, the TUC and all the other unions really stand for. Theirs is an appeal to the Tories and Liberal Democrats to work with the unions, rather than a fight to mobilise workers and young people against the government.

"For the last 10 years the PCS has been headed by General Secretary Mark Serwotka and since 2002, the union's national executive committee has been dominated by the Left Unity faction, including the

Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party. The PCS president and vice president, Janice Godrich and John McNally, are both members of the Socialist Party, and SWP member Sue Bond is also a vice president.

“Under this supposedly ‘left’ PCS leadership, the steepest decline in civil servant numbers in history has taken place from 540,000 in 2004 to 435,000 today. In that period the average pay for civil servants has remained stagnant... a measly £22,850—£2,000 less than in the private sector. There has been a two year pay freeze, plans to cut redundancy payments and attacks on pensions. Remember it was the PCS leadership that agreed to the introduction of a two-tier pension scheme in 2005. It imposed considerably worse benefits, both in terms of pensions and redundancy payments, on new starters.”

The government are pushing through the most drastic cuts in public spending since the 1930s, he said, but, “They could not do it if not for the unions.”

Woodbridge detailed how action involving two million workers and over 20 unions on pensions had, with the assistance of the fake lefts, been whittled down to one on May 10 by the PCS and just the health sector of Unite: “This is a farce. In reality, the government’s pension changes have already gone through. On April 1, the higher contribution rates took effect.” Woodbridge concluded that on May 10, “We will be encouraging workers in a revolt against their union leaders. We stand for that rebellion.”

TUSC’s Mary Cooke, a former Labour councillor, replied by pledging loyalty to the trade unions. “... we will be there supporting those unions, we will be hoping to give them strength... You can do what you like, but what you’ve got to do, I’m telling you, you’ve got to get out there and do it. That’s all I can say.”

In her closing remarks she summed up the entire campaign of TUSC by stretching out a hand of friendship to Labour’s Ron Graves. “You’ve got to join a party that’s going to work all together for the socialist ideas that Ron has,” she said. “I’ve never known a man with more socialist, communist stuff coming out of his mouth. Why aren’t you joining us?”

Graves, a supporter of a petty-bourgeois fake left tendency in the Labour Party, is president of the town’s Trades Council and is happily ensconced in the party. In response to Woodbridge’s denunciation of Labour

as a right wing party of bankers and war criminals, Graves declared that he would never turn his back on Labour and the trade unions and held out a hand of friendship to the Liberal Democrats who are in coalition with the Conservatives to boot.

“I will support every progressive move by the Labour Party leadership and the trade union leadership,” he said. “I’ll support every progressive idea put forward by the Green Party or the Lib Dems and I will also seek to explain why that does not go far enough.”

In his concluding remarks, restricted to just over one minute, Woodbridge said, “We stand for the development of a socialist alternative to the Labour Party and all these so called ‘lefts’ that have betrayed workers and will continue to do so.”



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