

UK: Rival Socialist Party members vie for position as deputy leader of civil servants union

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Months of infighting in the Socialist Party (SP) have erupted into a public row after one of its members, Janice Godrich, decided to stand against another, Chris Baugh, for the post of assistant general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS).

Baugh currently holds the position, but Godrich, the PCS national president, is standing as a candidate because she is deemed more acceptable to PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka.

Godrich accepted Serwotka's imprimatur in defiance of the decision of her party to continue backing Baugh.

She declared her own candidature during the PCS conference on May 16, just one day after fellow SP and PCS National Executive (NEC) member Marion Lloyd wrote triumphantly on the SP's website: "Re-elected for the 17th time is Socialist Party member Janice Godrich as national president."

The SP wrote in an August 20 article in the *Socialist* that "Janice had already agreed to this proposal [of Serwotka's] and was determined to press ahead, regardless of the outcome of discussions in our party." But its attempt at a polemic against Godrich only confirms that her own rotten opportunism is of a piece with her party's—and exposes the fraud of all its talk of "rank and file" initiatives to develop a "a programme for the transformation of the union movement."

The *Socialist* article records how Baugh has made the odd criticism of Serwotka, for which his boss had decided to hang him out to dry. But the SP makes clear that such occasional public spats occurred during years in which it agreed to remain silent regarding Serwotka's "undemocratic manoeuvres" against them.

Serwotka became seriously ill in 2010, having a heart pump fitted in 2013 before finally having a heart transplant in December 2016. The SP admits that "during the very difficult period of Mark Serwotka's illness and heart transplant... The sensitivity of the situation, with Mark critically ill, meant that the Socialist Party decided that its members would not raise any complaint about the undemocratic manoeuvres taking place."

Serwotka responded by pressing forward his moves against the SP in order to concentrate all power into his own hands—to

better discipline PCS members and either prevent or betray any struggle that broke out against the cuts, job losses and speed-ups imposed by the Conservative government.

The SP of course focuses almost exclusively on the trials and tribulations of Baugh. During this period, "the duties of the elected [assistant general secretary], Chris Baugh, have been repeatedly undermined or removed—in effect, handed to unelected officers," they write. Making clear the intimate collaboration of the SP with the union bureaucracy that was hitherto the norm, they continue, "Mark Serwotka justified this in discussions with Peter Taaffe, Socialist Party general secretary, and Rob Williams, the party's national industrial organiser. He [Serwotka] then wrote to the Socialist Party confirming his determination to stand a candidate against Chris, alleging 'repeated attempts to undermine my decisions and my authority as GS'."

The SP is at pains to insist that its loyalty to Serwotka was unquestionable throughout this period, but "This has not prevented completely false rumours that Chris was 'plotting a coup'."

Baugh "and other Socialist Party members" were in fact loyally "involved in discussions within our party on how to defend the lay democracy from infringement by unelected full-time officers." But only within the party and not before the PCS membership! "[W]e agreed that we could not raise that infringement without a conflict with Mark Serwotka, at a time when he was unfortunately gravely ill, and would therefore remain silent."

What is outlined by the SP is a conspiracy against the interests of PCS members, centred on a pact of silence it agreed with Serwotka.

By way of explaining Godrich's decision to strike an independent deal with Serwotka at their expense, and Serwotka's manoeuvres against PCS members, the SP states, "The possibility of creeping bureaucratisation exists in every workers' organisation, including the most formally democratic. It is not only, or even mainly, related to material privileges. Rather, under the continual pressures of the class struggle, the administrative machine can tend to supplant the collective

voice of the rank and file. Workers' parties and even workers' states have also faced—and will face—such difficulties...”

“Faced with a drop in the number of PCS activists—partly as a result of job losses, because of cuts to facility time and, in some cases, due to the difficulties of the period—there is bound to be a pull to substitute unelected full-time officials for the union members. This must be seriously resisted, both from the top and by the rank and file. Unfortunately, this has not been resisted sufficiently by Mark Serwotka and others in the leadership.”

The SP writes as if this “creeping bureaucratisation” is an unfortunate disease that Serwotka and Godrich have contracted despite its own best efforts. But the PCS leadership includes Baugh as assistant general secretary, Godrich as president and another five Socialist Party members on the National Executive Committee!

The loyalty to the union bureaucracy of all of them, not only Godrich, has very real material foundations. The PCS has a membership of 181,000 paying dues of £21.02 million. From this, the union bureaucracy claimed in salary and expenses £11.32 million—more than 50 percent of annual income. Serwotka was paid £120,496 last year and Baugh £100,866, excluding expenses and other perks.

The role of the PCS and “Left Unity”

Serwotka was formerly a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Organiser group in the 1980s and early 1990s. After leaving Socialist Organiser, he was first a supporter of the Socialist Workers Party-led Socialist Alliance and then the Respect organisation—led by the SWP in alliance with George Galloway.

The PCS executive has been dominated by the Left Unity faction since 2003, which includes the SP, SWP, and various Stalinists. It works alongside the PCS Democrats, a smaller group that includes various Labourites, as the Democracy Alliance (DA), which won 29 of the 30 NEC places this year.

With the backing of the pseudo-left groups, Serwotka's speciality has been proclaiming his constant readiness to fight for his members and the entire working class—alone if necessary—while not lifting a finger to genuinely oppose the decimation of PCS members' pay, terms and conditions.

In 2011, the Tory government rolled out attacks on public sector workers pensions, including doubling employee contributions and a switch to link pensions with the lower index of inflation. This met with massive opposition that forced the public sector unions to call a one-day strike in November 2011 involving up three million workers. But over the next months, this fight was systematically wound down, including by the “rejectionist” unions such as the PCS. A review of this betrayal

is detailed in the WSWs article, “Socialist Party defends betrayal of UK pension dispute.”

This and innumerable other betrayals have collectively facilitated a decimation of public sector jobs, so that the SP notes there are now “over one million fewer workers than in 2009,” including “a fall in the number of civil servants by around a quarter to 427,000.” This, the SP adds, “is the biggest factor in the decline in membership of the PCS, from 313,000 in 2006 to 195,000 in 2016.”

Seeing an opportunity to profit from the rift between the SP and Serwotka, the SWP has issued a statement characterised by truly epic sycophancy.

“It is the SWP's assessment that Mark Serwotka has been a driving force behind all of the national industrial action taken by PCS in recent years,” the SWP proclaims. “[W]e think that of all the national officers of the union, Mark Serwotka's policies are the ones that are most likely to lead the union to successfully fightback against the attacks we face.”

The SWP then backs Godrich based upon her being “the candidate who is best able to work with Mark Serwotka to implement these policies.”

Not only does she enjoy the support of this giant of the trade union movement, but is also committed to “work to revitalise Left Unity”—in all probability minus the SP!

This experience will do nothing to alter the constant boosting by the SP of the trade unions as the “basic organisations of the working class,” any more than the decades-long and near unbroken series of defeats they have inflicted on the working class. Hostile to the revolutionary struggle for socialism, their loyalty to the union bureaucracy is not altered in the slightest by their polite criticism of this or that bureaucrat and their most egregious sell-outs and betrayals. Like the rest of the pseudo-left, they make up a politically significant component of the trade union bureaucracy—offering the services of their party's members and their newspapers/web sites as a propaganda arm for the unions, specialising in policing rising social discontent and political hostility to Serwotka and his ilk.

What these groups fear most is a genuine rank-and-file movement that would threaten their own privileged positions within unions that function as an industrial police force for the employers. The militant oppositional sentiment now growing among workers expressed in the strikes and protests by junior doctors, university lecturers, NHS workers and others, repeatedly pitches them in direct conflict with the union bureaucracy. The SP and its various rival groupings stand on the wrong side of this emerging conflict.



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