Public sector trade unionism and the political economy of austerity

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Introduction: It has been an explicit part of government policy that large-scale cuts have been implemented in public sector budgets along with cuts to benefits. These two areas, with new investment, have taken the biggest hits since the 2008 crisis and the 2010 coalition government came to power.

For most public sector workers these cuts have been implemented through workload increases as conditions of service have worsened. This supply-side reaction by managers reflects the fact that there has been no reduction in demand for services across the board … children still need educating, ill people still need health care, streets need to be cleaned, local and central government must still function, cars still crash on motorways, and fellow citizens are born while others age.

Other than in local government there have not been, pari passu, reductions in those at work. What has happened is the use of more flexible contracts through zero-hours, casualization, outsourcing, and staged retirements. The outcome is a workforce with changed skill mix profile and more insecure work. This tends to affect women and young workers the most.

With low inflation, however, the pressure on pay and subsequent wages’ movement has been weaker than expected. This removes the key element in most trade union revivals, rapidly falling real incomes. It also allows the government to hold back wages, wage progression, and pensions with a less severe reaction from those involved.

While the industrial response has been limited, the political response has been virtually non-existent. The labour movement has struggled to come to terms with the new realities at both the political and industrial level … so the Labour Party lags behind its own activists and union demands for reversing public sector reforms in terms of ownership, structures, accountability, and national pay setting.
But this period has also been characterised by a lack of solidarity, shared strategies, and co-ordinated action by the TUC and individual unions (e.g. PCS and UNISON cannot agree on most areas of policy and practice; the NUT and NASUWT remain largely divided; the BMA and RCN tend to remain aloof, with the FBU and PFEW somewhat isolated). Despite the rhetoric at TUC meetings, the odd day of action, and a similar set of demands, the overall picture remains of a trade union movement inward looking, protecting its own back yard, and failing to reach out to its members and potential members. Overall growth, absolutely and relatively, remains stagnant in most sectors and among most groups.

In periods of relative quiet some union leaders and activists can succumb to desperate ideas wrapped up in increasingly out-of-touch and idiosyncratic forms.

Temptations include a range of displacement activity, foolhardy strike calls, the usual in-fighting with the usual suspects, backyard fears, and disconnect with the wider class issues (e.g. immigration and foreign policy).

Class struggle in the UK is at a low level in terms of industrial action and mass demonstrations, and the balance of class forces favours the dominant capitalist class which benefits greatly from a fragmented, disjointed, and divided working class. Objectively, the class nature of employment has become increasingly proletarianised despite the rise in fake self-employment, and the class nature of society has become starker and more observable. But, the classic Marxist notion of a class as a class, aware and self-aware, remains elusive. Divide and rule enables the Conservatives and other right wing forces to push through an endless stream of policies designed to roll back working-class advances since 1945. Yet, the trade union movement, despite much white noise, has failed to develop a co-ordinated and united strategy of opposition.

The state of the struggle and the struggle with the state:

1 **Meaning of power?** Political power in the UK is centred in the government of the day and linked with the interests of big business, private media, academic opinion formers, and senior managers in the public sector. Such power is exercised through control over budgets and structures, massive patronage in terms of senior appointments, and by dominating contemporary debate over issues such as efficiency and privatisation, the citizen user as a consumer, and pitching public and private sector workers against each other.

Only mobilised and organised working-class activity can counter such power of the ruling class. That is why unions remain central to any struggle, ideological and actual, against the advance of the capitalist interest. As such union power involves, inter alia, influence over members, employers, and government views and decisions; as the ability to mobilise in practice both people and ideas; and to take action against employers and governments (local and national, and governmental bodies such as NHS Trusts). The special case of workers employed by state institutions and arms of the state mean that strike action may harm other workers as service users rather than profit making company managers. In such situations building the unity of producers and users, bringing together the demand and supply side of public services, and forging alliances within and between groups is an essential feature of the current situation.
Most workers still employed and unionised in public bodies come under the old APT&C grades with fewer in the manual category. Virtually no managers remain unionised outside the civil service. In terms of absolute and relative (density) union membership has held up well in education and health sectors; remained stable in fire and police; but has declined in local and central government. There remain some important regional and sector variations. Public sector workers make up the majority of trade union and TUC membership. There are high proportions of women members, BME members, and graduates. The heart of the UK trade union movement now lies within the public sector, and yet some union leaders and political activists still cling on to forms of smoke stack socialism and old clichés of manual male private sector workers as shock troops of the movement. Such blindness to contemporary realities fuels suspicion of a backward looking movement with no answers to the sharp questions posed by Thatcherism and the post-Thatcher legacy within the wider labour movement.

Collective bargaining has held up formally but less well on the ground. In education there is still national bargaining over pay and pensions, but the development of Academy schools has fragmented bargaining in that sector. In FE fragmented employer-based bargaining has been a disaster while in HE there is still a veneer of a national system. In the health sector with the dominance of the Agenda for Change system, again pay for most groups remains nationally based (note recent changes in Wales), but NHS Trust level activity has again fragmented certain areas. In fire and police services pay and pensions remain national, while in local and central government pay and pensions follow either national or national sector bargaining systems. Pay Review Bodies (for nurses, teachers, prison officers and others) are treated as a form of mediated collective bargaining. But these systems have not been really tested due to low inflation, fewer than predicted job losses, and unilateral government changes in pensions and pay. There have been serious attacks on union activity at the level of the employer in areas such as time off, check-off, representation, and ‘good faith’ bargaining even over grievances and disciplinary cases.

Actions: most unions have been involved in pension disputes, especially NUT, UCU, and FBU. Some have been on strike over pay … PCS, UCU, and UNISON (local government). Some of these disputes have been long-running and remain unresolved (FBU on pensions), while others have been involved in strikes and action short of strikes over pay in sporadic bursts. There have been hundreds of local disputes over terms and conditions, redundancies, restrictions on union activities, and representation. As we know the Conservatives are floating further ideas on restrictions on strikes in these areas. The overall position remains the same: there is little appetite among union members in the public sector to take strike action. This is partly to do with low inflation, partly down to a natural (and correct) reluctance to strike when harm is done to fellow workers, partly due to a lack of co-ordinated union activity, and partly down to a lack of political support at local and national level from the Labour Party.

Outcomes: there have been many local successes where jobs have been saved, terms and conditions maintained, and union rights protected. Nationally there has been little movement on pay and pensions as a result of action taken. In general the unions have managed to hold on to members, keep their finances secure, maintain high levels of information and propaganda (see role of CLASS), push policy debate inside the movement, and campaign on a range of single-issues. Some public sector unions continue to support and fund the Labour Party (UNITE, UNISON, GMB), and have a loud voice in some policy areas. Most single-occupation unions for teachers, nurses, lecturers, civil servants, and fire fighters are not affiliated to Labour and tend to use their political funds to campaign on professional issues that match with trade union issues.
6 Forward marching: there is the usual frustrating paradox at the heart of union politics and activity: large numbers of union members and the wider public support many of their policies (against privatisation, against cuts and closures, for the living wage and more, for more democracy, and against self-serving managers), but this does not translate into significant levels of political and industrial movement. Avenues for influence remain limited despite the information revolution, and mobilisation beyond the ranks of union activists remains a barrier to progress. What is lacking is a co-ordinating body that can link up trade union demands with calls for a more socially just set of policy programmes. Various initiatives have been tried, some more sensible and successful than others. Some, like the Trade Unions and Socialist Coalition were established on a narrow political front. The mobilisation around Scottish independence was dominated by varieties of nationalist rather than class politics. The People’s Assembly, however, offers greater hope.

7 Joining up the dots, both theoretically and practically, is the way forward. The movement must give meaning to solidarity in action, creating a relevant debate around concrete issues (job security and its direct link with quality of service provision, the living wage), widening this into support for initiatives like the IER’s Manifesto for Collective Bargaining, reaching out to non-members without rancour, and backing wider movements such as the People’s Assembly.