



The Cuts

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To those who work in the public sector, it was encouraging to see such large contingents of industrial workers at the national Lobby against the cuts on November 28th last year. Many of us had been to previous demonstrations in 1976 and 77, and never before had we felt the support of such workers. Dave Priscott's article (*Marxism Today* February 1980) shows how this support was won by a campaign amongst industrial workers in South Yorkshire; his contribution should be welcomed, yet we have serious reservations about this strategy.

Priscott's article describes the tactics which were used to win over large sections of the industrial working class to the idea of taking industrial action against the cuts. These tactics were located within a strategy which sees the cuts as one of several attacks by the Thatcher government against working people, and conceives the struggle against the cuts being led and directed by the organised working class through industrial action and demonstrations.

It will remain the case that the key to defeating Tory policies is determined action by the organised industrial working class, *backed up by the broader community*' (our italics).

Dave Priscott is quite uncompromising about this. He describes the 'organised roots in industry and the Labour movement' being of 'supreme importance', and offers the South Yorkshire experience as a definitive example. Whilst we welcome the tactical intervention of industrial workers in the struggle over the cuts, we will argue in this contribution that a strategy based squarely on this foundation, takes no account of the nature of Welfare State Services and the way they are experienced, and will therefore be likely to fail. It does not address itself to the politics of the Welfare State and therefore ignores its contradictions and the divisions which it fosters. Above all it will fail to create the alliances necessary to defeat an assault on progressive parts of the Welfare State.

Our criticisms are based not on what Priscott says, therefore, but what he fails to say. The splendid campaign he describes is not specific — that is, those tactics could have

been used to mobilise industrial workers against any aspect of repressive Thatcherism. They imply nothing about the cuts, and we believe that a cuts campaign does need particular analysis and as a consequence, a qualitatively different strategy.

Contradictions in the Welfare State

Priscott's article assumes that the state is benevolently neutral in its provision of welfare services — that consumers recognise the benefits of services immediately and intimately, and are therefore able to respond from their class position to threats to such services. The reality is of course very different. All of us consume the services of the Welfare State, whether in the form of council housing, refuse collection or the National Health Service. All of us use the services offered by nationalised industries — electricity, gas or BL. Yet an analysis of the way in which these services are *experienced* both by providers and consumers immediately reveals deep contradictions which lie at the heart of the Welfare State. For example, local authority housing departments are felt to be repressive bureaucracies by many tenants, hospital treatment is frequently insensitive and depersonalised, and nationalised industries are felt to be inefficient and responsible for many thousands of redundancies. Any attempt to defend them in their present form is a kind of fetishism into which the Labour Right so often lapses — 'It's council housing, so it must be good'. The deep reservoir of potential antipathy towards public services within working people was successfully harnessed last winter during the so-called 'Winter of Discontent' disputes over council and hospital workers' pay. This is no accident. The history of the Welfare State is full of contradictions and was born of a struggle between the needs of working people and the exploitative relations of capitalist production. In short, the Welfare State is not definitively 'ours', though for more than twenty years the Left on the whole has behaved as if it is. Any opposition to the cuts based on slogans of 'No cuts' inherently denies this analysis, pays no regard to history, and will have a very limited appeal. We

would like to illustrate this by using the example of South Yorkshire: Priscott's article mentions the pride felt by some Labour councillors in Sheffield in their services, and cites public transport and housing as two key issues. Roy Hattersley used to be Chairman of Sheffield's Housing Committee, and it was during his term of office that the notorious Hyde Park Flats were conceived. The thousands of tenants in these blocks are not going to spring to the defence of such items of public expenditure, conceived by a committee chairman whose view of politics was: 'We ran the city with fists of stainless steel... We took all the committee chairmanships... any councillor who sought, without approval, to alter philosophy, proposal or punctuation was automatically disciplined.' A reliance on past achievements is not enough, even in Sheffield... This failure to analyse the nature of the Welfare State and the way it is experienced leads directly to our reservations about the South Yorkshire experience as a general model. The strategy fails to mobilise the crucial sections of the community against the cuts by an almost exclusive reliance on the strength of industrial workers who are somehow seen as 'more advanced' by virtue of being 'organised'.

'The general conception was to bring a whole community into action against the cuts, with its best organised and most militant workers as the spearhead.'

Involving the community

It is unfortunate that (in the article at least), only a tokenistic nod is made in the direction of 'the community', and this is tellingly revealed in the passage describing the outcome of the Sheffield rally:

'From this high point the message was taken back into the factories and pits, to the local authority employees, to the local communities and into the colleges and universities, to win support for the November 28th lobby.' (our italics)

Later, Priscott admits that the campaign experienced difficulties in involving community organisations, but only partly explains them by describing opposition from Labour and Communist Party members. We would suggest that these difficulties arose precisely as a result of the South Yorkshire strategy. Firstly, the strategy is based on mobilising the industrial working class, and assumes (against much evidence from NUPE and NALGO for example) that public sector workers have an exclusive concern over job security, and less concern over services. Secondly, it is based entirely on demonstrations and rallies, and says nothing about the role of workers working *within* the state to defend and transform services. This

over-reliance on street politics places many thousands of recipients of Welfare State services outside the ambit of the strategy; for example by turning away from the possibility of alliances with the unemployed and others dependent on state benefits which are also threatened by the cuts. Thirdly, the South Yorkshire strategy does not take account of the position of women, who are probably the greatest potential force to be mobilised against Tory policies. Women are massively and intensely involved in working within the Welfare State: they make up two-thirds of NUPE's membership, and half of NALGO's, and together comprise nearly a million, often very low paid public sector workers. Women who are unemployed are in many ways far more dependent on the services *offered* by the Welfare State than are men, and it is women who often stay at home all day in poorly designed and constructed council housing, who often have to manage

on insufficient state benefits, and who suffer most during periods of industrial action within both the public and the private sector. The South Yorkshire strategy offers no possibility of uniting with women unless they attend the demonstrations. Lastly, the strategy restricts itself to defending those services already in existence, but it should not be forgotten that the cuts also imply that those services which have never been systematically provided by the state now begin to recede into the distant future. Again it is frequently women who are at the receiving end of non-provisions, and are forced to stay at home to care for children, aged relatives and the handicapped.

The most effective local campaigns against the cuts have been those which have recognised the contradictions in the Welfare State, and in defending services have also sought to transform them, rendering them more democratic and responsive to the needs

of both consumers and providers. What is needed now is to translate these localised experiences into a national campaign, which challenges the divisions which are fostered by the Right in order to hinder our struggles. The transformation of public services cannot be postponed until they have been saved, because without this transformation, they will not survive intact. This means that in the struggle over the Welfare State, the left has to conduct campaigns which seek to overcome the traditional splits between what is political (militant male trade union activity in factories) and what is personal (damp seeping through kitchen walls), between work (where you fight back) and home (where you don't), between trade union struggles and community struggles. The South Yorkshire strategy unfortunately does not meet these requirements but simply asks everyone to line up behind industrial trade unionists under the slogan 'No Cuts'.