
'There was only one side to be on'

The victories of the North Glasgow UNISON Hospitals branch in two disputes, the Medical Secretaries and the SODEXHO ancillary workers, set an example for the health service unions. Success breeds success, and these victories led to a series of strikes by other health workers. You might have imagined that UNISON would have learned from these struggles in order to strengthen the union on a national scale. Alas, these victories were somewhat embarrassing for some UNISON bureaucrats because the branch secretary in Glasgow is a leading member of the Scottish Socialist Party.

Unnamed UNISON figures have been briefing the media about the dreaded Carolyn Leckie and her 'political agenda' as if, mirroring the virtual world of the worst of the media, this single figure was duping unsuspecting workers into taking action for the interests of the SSP. The unofficial action which lasted 3 weeks in Glasgow was the result of the genuine frustration of union members with a conservative union apparatus. Joanna Hill reports.

A mass meeting of hundreds voted to return to work after over three weeks of unofficial action. They have come through an astonishing series of political manoeuvres by their employer, the Scottish Executive and the Westminster Government and won the right to continue to genuinely pursue their re-grading claim. The barriers that were placed in the way of the North Glasgow Hospitals UNISON Branch and its Administration & Clerical workers make a lot of sense if you're a member of a Labour Government or an apologist for one. And it also became clear that the links between this strike and the fire-fighters' struggle were more than being part of a general upsurge in Trade Union combativity. The intrigue around this will continue to unfold for years to come. But for now.....

For three and a half years the Westminster Government has been negotiating with Trade Unions in secret on 'Agenda for Change' - a proposed overhaul of the whole NHS pay structure. Unions agree that the current structure is way out of date and riddled with inequities. Jobs have become much more complex and changed beyond recognition. Sexism in the pay structure is endemic. For the majority of that time the government has stalled. At the beginning of this year, the negotiations almost collapsed because there was no 'new money' available. As with the fire fighters,

the government wanted the existing workforce to pay for its own reforms and any increases in basic pay; a 'something for something' deal.

The North Glasgow claim was submitted on 31st January following the success of the Medical Secretaries (despite the ballot being blocked for 4 months in the run up to the Westminster elections). There then followed months of stalling, obfuscation and gerrymandering; the employer assisted by full time and lay political opponents of the North Glasgow Branch.

But at the beginning of October the Trust began what seemed meaningful negotiations and an offer was made. It looked like a settlement was within grasp. The Firefighters' campaign was gaining momentum. Reports started coming through from UNISON that the government had 'picked up the pace' on 'Agenda for Change'. The Trust canceled a couple of meetings and the Branch requested a ballot for industrial action. Jim Devine (UNISON full-time official) issued a press release on "ending the NHS pay post code lottery". The Herald carried it and the same article suggested Trust Freedoms could be abolished by 1st December. The following Monday the Trust broke off negotiations citing an announcement was expected on 'Agenda for Change' by the end of November. But the Branch ballot was denied on the basis that Jim Devine said a low pay offer was expected on a Scottish level though nothing was in writing.

Unofficial action

It was clear at the time that the demands of the claim would not be encompassed by any such offer and assurances were given that if that were the case the ballot would go ahead. That commitment was reneged on. The intention was to cut the Branch and Administration & Clerical Workers off at the pass; there should be no strike action and no more victories for the North Glasgow branch. It was all to be tied up by the 28th November. The carrot was going to be an interim deal on 'Agenda for Change' in exchange for the castration of militancy. The Scottish Executive and the employer had determined the strategy. All the union had to ensure was that there was no strike action. They could have accepted defeat but the workers decided they had no option but to take unofficial action. There was going to be only one chance to fight; time was against them as well as all the odds.

No strike deal?

The pressure was on Jim Devine to come up with the goods. With the workers on unofficial action and no written offer in sight, a ballot was belatedly agreed. Right up until 22nd November there was nothing in writing. Then a Scottish offer came out, conditional on existing claims being withdrawn, along with a 'concordat' that was effectively a no-strike deal. The offer was nowhere near enough materially and the 'strings' laid bare the real agenda. Branches were given four working days to respond 'Yes or no'. The deadline was set for midday, the 28th November, two and a half hours before the UK 'Agenda for Change' negotiations were to conclude and two and a half hours before Jack McConnell was to stand up for First Ministers' Question Time.

The North Glasgow strikers had refused to play the game. The 28th November had been earmarked as the day Labour would present an 'agreement' on NHS pay. They were intent on dividing public sector workers and isolating the Firefighters. Scotland was a problem, hence the interim offer and 'no strike' concordat. But the strike ensured that the 'concordat' would not be ushered in quietly. Jim Devine's scandalous role was obvious. The holes and strings were magnified in the heat of struggle and branches all over Scotland were not prepared to sign up to a bum deal they were being bounced into. By midday on Thursday, the vast majority of branches had rejected the concordat.

No agreement

The UK 'Agenda for Change' negotiations did conclude that afternoon but there is no 'agreement'. UNISON is committed to an extensive all members' consultation that includes a special delegate conference and an all members' ballot. What's more the Health Group Executive of UNISON has decided not to begin that consultation till the Fire fighters' dispute is resolved. Dave Prentis, UNISON General Secretary has declared that NHS staff will not be used as a stick to beat the Firefighters with. That didn't stop the Scottish Executive and the Westminster government announcing an 'agreement' on NHS pay on Thursday afternoon. The Millbank spin machine went into overdrive. NHS staff and unions have been cynically manoeuvred by the government into being that stick whether they like it or not. The 'deal' itself has been grossly overstated in an effort to undermine any opposition at the outset. And there will be opposition. It will

reduce overtime payments for Sundays, harmonise up hours for large numbers of staff, reduce shift allowances and increase the ratio of unregistered staff to professional staff. And it's nowhere near enough money!

It was all supposed to come together for Labour in Scotland; militancy put down and a propaganda coup, as an opener to the 2003 election campaign. North Glasgow wasn't for going down. Announcements on dreadful NHS waiting times served to upset their plans too. The Health Committee of UNISON has now declared that it is unacceptable for existing claims to be withdrawn as a condition to any low pay offer and that the part of the offer in relation to A & C staff is wholly inadequate. Jim Devine had to make a tactical retreat. There is no Scottish Concordat or deal, the North Glasgow Trust still has an outstanding grading claim to settle and a ballot has been authorised.

There will be further attempts to improve the deal and the Health Committee will meet again in the New Year. After over three weeks of unofficial action, UNISON did not repudiate it.

The wheat has been separated from the chaff

It has been a difficult dispute and many giants of the struggle have emerged. The war is not won yet and the Branch will come under intense scrutiny and pressure. Only people really close to the dispute can understand the complex challenges that were faced in terms of tactics and strategy. Some will question if it was right to go unofficial in the first place. But the A & C workers still have a claim to fight for because they've defeated attempts to bury it and the Branch. In terms of Trade Unionists, the wheat has been separated from the chaff at every level. Strikers have been politicised much more deeply than in any other strike the branch has conducted.

There was only one side to be on, the side of the members. With a major propaganda battle happening around the Firefighters' dispute, other public sector unions, especially in health, could have a crucial role to play. Part of that will be raising awareness of what 'Agenda for Change' is all about and making sure members fully participate in the debate. As part of our solidarity work with the FBU, we need to arm them with the facts of what is really proposed for the NHS and counter the propaganda as best we can. Strikers have been taking part in joint meetings with the FBU. This should continue in some form. The Firefighters will not be left to fight alone.

Despite the action being unofficial, they asked the Branch to participate in ensuring the provision of emergency cover! This is a sign of weakness on the part of the Trust. On the one hand they try to isolate and ridicule the strikers in the media but need the influence of the Branch to cope with the strike. It has never been so important to be steadfast and brave.

From the strike bulletin

This is one leading striker's response:

"Ordinary, decent, hard-working people, driven to despair by 10 months of delays, broken promises, and diversionary tactics with relation to their upgrading claim, by a Trust who, despite repeated claims that these same A & C workers are greatly valued and indeed crucial to the efficient running of hospitals, have taken the courageous step of withdrawing their labour through sheer disgust at the attitude of the Trust, and their partners in UNISON, Jim Devine, Joe De Paula, and Eddie Egan, who, after giving assurances that if their claim was not met by the 'Lothian Deal', official ballot would be approved, changed their mind. It is a sad day when the legitimate claim of 800 workers for official ballot is so shamefully disregarded by a UNISON mafia with an alternative agenda.

The nameless cowards who are attacking Carolyn Leckie and other Branch Members as being militant socialist activists do a great disservice to the people who demanded on Thursday 7th November to take unofficial action. Each and every one of these brave and principled people, who with heavy hearts took the decision to strike, will remember who is trying to sell them out.

The members, fully aware of the consequences of unofficial action, explained to them at length, took the decision to withdraw their labour. They represent all shades of opinion, political and otherwise. It's such a pity that senior union officials do not have the same standards.

Those officials complain, having rejected a ballot, that the appeals process has not been exhausted. This, from the people who rejected the appeal in the first place, is as laughable as it is pathetic, and exposes the intent of these people to disrupt the action of many angry people.

Where has Union democracy gone that 3 people can override the demands of 800?

Carolyn Leckie has worked tirelessly for her members, has kept them informed of all matters arising during upgrading negotiations and together with branch officials and many volunteers, has explained, over several months all consequences of both official and unofficial action. There is clearly a

vendetta against Carolyn because of her membership of the Scottish Socialist Party, but the real reason is probably, besides jealousy, that she behaves as a decent Union Representative should, i. e. representing the wishes and aspirations of her members through the democratic process. The strike committees are representative of the varying views of the members on strike, and those of us who are members of other political parties with party views which differ with Carolyn's, are proud to be associated with her."

Agenda for change

Agenda for Change was introduced with great fanfare as a "modernisation" scheme, which the unions had "agreed" to unlike those dastardly dinosaur firefighters. Whilst the pay structure in the NHS may have required simplification, what the management wants appears to be a "performance pay" scheme, which, like any such scheme will divide the workforce amongst themselves and undermine the possibility of developing solidarity across the grades.

The document released by the government says that: "Each year, staff who are below the maximum point of their pay band will have a *normal expectation* of progressing to the next highest point." (Our emphasis)

However, there will be two points in each pay band known as gateways "at which there will be an assessment of the knowledge and skills that staff are applying in their jobs".

"Pay progression at the two gateways will be linked to the demonstration of applied knowledge and skills."

It is difficult to view this as anything other than performance pay. The deal has been presented by the government as one which would give big increases to many staff. Yet the increases are for most people 3.25% each year for 3 years. Indeed the Health Service Journal estimates that 100,000 workers would actually lose out in the scheme.

Even those staff below the new minimum levels will not go to the bottom of their grade, but will have "transitional points" below the new minimum!

Management want to equalise the working week at 37.5 hours. Staff currently working less than this will find their working week progressively rising to that level.

There clearly needs to be a national campaign against the introduction of performance pay.