

Unite general secretary Len McCluskey's speech to the PCS conference, Brighton, 20 May 2011

Check against delivery

Brothers and sisters,

Thank you for that welcome. It is an honour and a privilege for me to have the opportunity to speak to you today. I am pleased to be here for two particular reasons.

First, Unite and PCS are not just sister unions. I believe we both represent a particular kind of trade unionism, the kind of trade unionism our movement needs today. Fighting-back trade unionism, putting members first. Prepared to stand up and confront the bad employers in the private sector or in government, tolerant, democratic unions, taking on bad employers, not our own activists.

The alliance – the unity – between Unite and PCS can and must be a major force for progress within our movement today

The second reason is that our movement is now at a crossroads. We face challenges greater than for a generation. This Con-Dem coalition has thrown down the gauntlet to the entire working class, and to everyone who believes in a civilised society.

Its aim is to dismantle everything and anything of our social gains which Thatcher may have not got round to in the 1980s.

The NHS above all. To make ordinary people pay for the bankers' crisis.

Working people – our families, our communities – did not create this crisis.

Our public sector, supporting the most vulnerable in our society, did not create this crisis. Nor did our pay, our pensions, our services. We did not create it.

And we are not going to pay for it.

This was a capitalist crisis. And they should foot the bill, but the Eton classroom running the government don't see it that way. They want to cut, cut and cut again so the rich can carry on feasting.

And it is going about this agenda with speed and a sense of purpose, if we do not rise to the challenge, we face marginalisation in our society. Trade unions have no god-given right to exist, we have to earn it every day by what we do to meet the challenges facing working people.

If there have ever been times when we could afford to drift they are now long behind us. And if we let the government get away with what it is doing, if we go meekly like lambs to the slaughter, we will have signed our own death warrant as a serious social force in Britain today.

Of course, we know that it does not have to be like that.

Across the movement spirits are rising and we are feeling a new sense of strength. We have proved that we can get people out on the streets to oppose the Tory plans with that magnificent demonstration on March 26 – the biggest the trade union movement has ever organised.

And the elections in May show that the voters are prepared to punish the Lib Dems at least for their part in this social vandalism. Groups like UK Uncut are showing a lead in direct action targeting the fat cat tax dodgers, but we have yet to prove that we can stop the government in its tracks.

And we have yet to win enough support for our economic alternative, putting this right will be the work of many hands of course. But I believe a particular responsibility falls on our two unions to give a lead.

That is why I welcome the Joint Agreement between PCS and Unite which we have signed here today.

It starts to spell out the basic elements of a progressive and socially just economic alternative to the government's plans. And it commits our two unions to do more to both flesh this alternative out and work to popularise it among working people to dispel the myth that there is no alternative to the Cameron-Osborne strategy.

We now need to work together to get that message out to people, to hold meetings, rallies, events to mobilise millions of people behind a different vision of how society should be. And to put – dare I say it – socialism back on the political agenda in this country. If we cannot do it now, when the failures of free-market capitalism are clear to everyone, then when?

Let me say a word about fighting back. We all know it is easy to say, but harder to do most of the time. It requires not just rhetoric, but conviction and commitment, organisation and discipline.

But to those who say it is pointless or hopeless, I say look at British Airways. Thousands of cabin crew, not perhaps your average image of trade unionists. Middle class, loyal professionals who stood firm against the attacks of one of the world's biggest companies for 18 months or more, and in the face of the courts and the anti-union laws designed to frustrate their democratic decisions.

Who stood by their union. Maintained their unity and dignity, and can now rebuild their relationship with their employer with their heads held high, their union unbroken. I am proud of them, and proud of the support Unite gave them.

Our task is to take some of that spirit of struggle into the defence of the public sector. We know it is not easy, we have years of defeat behind us, which has sapped the morale in places. Voluntary redundancy arrangements can of course help the government achieve some of its objectives, and unless our members are convinced that the cuts aren't necessary, that the deficit is a problem – if it is a problem at all – which should be addressed through growth and higher taxes on the wealthy, until then mobilisation will be harder.

But it is not made any easier by not trying, by seeking excuses to delay. You are leading the way with your action on June 30, blazing a trail which I hope will be followed across the public sector.

Already Unite members have voted for strike action in Southampton, next Monday. Our members at the Ministry of Defence will be joining your picket lines at lunchtime when you strike, and we will be forming joint strike committees where we can.

Unite declares its full solidarity with your action on June 30 and we will be urging all our members to do whatever they can on the day to express that solidarity and to stand united against the cuts.

As we build up to still broader action, if needs be, later in the year.

And to be absolutely clear, we will be balloting our members, coordinating our actions with yours and with other unions and building broad and effective community support to stop this government's agenda in its tracks.

There is one more reason why I am delighted to be here today: I am a one-term leader of my union. I want to use that time to build a stronger future for our movement as a whole, a growing movement wielding real social and political influence for our members and for working people as a whole.

Strong at the workplace, and strong in the community as well. Building that movement is of course the work of many hands, our activists and our representatives above all.

When I look into that future, I see your general secretary Mark Serwotka, as its face. He is one of the outstanding, principled leaders of our movement over the last generation, a comrade who put the members first and our values first. I do not know what the future holds, of course. We do not always get all we wish for, but I do know that I will be proud to spend the next five years working alongside Mark – and all the team here at PCS.

- To defend our people in the teeth of the present savage assault.
- To rebuild our movement.
- To campaign for our values.
- And to open the way to the Socialist society.

That is the only guarantee of security, justice and peace in the world.