



North East Workers & Politics

Build the Workers Opposition, Set Our Own Agenda,
No to Handing the Initiative to Any Other Force!

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By Donation

Continued Opposition to the Government's Anti-Social Devolution Act

The Cities and Local Government Devolution Act received the Royal Assent on January 28. The Act promises election of mayors for "Combined Authorities", as well as the devolution of certain functions of governance to these and "Economic Prosperity Boards (EPBs)" throughout England.

Since the Act was passed, its imposition has not been the plain sailing that the government intended. So far, out of the 10 devolution deals agreed and 34 applications pending, only one large authority, Manchester, has so far reached the stage that from April 1 it has started to manage its £6 billion health and social care budget as part of an extension of devolved powers under the Act. But even in Manchester, concerns about the risks to the funding of public services, including social and health care in the city, are still being expressed by those involved. In the rest of England, many borough councils are still refusing to confirm even the signed devolution deals or are delaying their implementation.

So for example in March in the North East, Gateshead Council repudiated the devolution agreement and its elected mayor

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Demonstration in Newcastle on April 9 in support of the Junior Doctors

What Is Behind the Attack On Ian Lavery and the NUM?

Over recent weeks Ian Lavery, MP for Wansbeck in Northumberland, and Labour's Shadow Minister for Trade Unions and Civil Society has been subject to a high level campaign of specious allegations aimed at discrediting him and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) (Northumberland Area) for "profiting" from the mining community. There is nothing in these allegations that in any way prove that Ian Lavery has "profited" from the mining community other than receiving the payments he was entitled to under NUM terms and conditions. But what is most detestable and

patronising is the message that these allegations are giving to the working class mining communities of Northumberland that they do not have the right to have a highly professional organised trade union working for them now that their mines have been closed. Of course it is also hypocritical in that those that closed down the livelihood of the miners have the protection of the state and the vast profits expropriated from the labour of the mining communities. Whilst on the other hand they expect the ex-miners, their families and their communities to exist without their professional

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that it had previously signed. Following this, the six remaining local authorities which are part of the North East Combined Authority (NECA) have delayed their decision. In a ballot conducted online by the *North East Chronicle Live* in March, a majority voted against the devolution deal as it stands, which led the paper to report that “the case against a regional authority and mayor looked stronger than ever, as Gateshead said it would not be signing up to the deal”.

In the south of England, the Hampshire and Isle of Wight partnership voted against an elected mayor. The government’s continued attempt to impose a “metro mayor” culminated in the Conservative Hampshire County Council leader advising the government that they were not prepared at this stage to progress a proposed “Solent Devolution” deal, or confirm the County Council’s membership “in the timescales set by government”.

On March 18, West Cornwall Health Watch included in their AGM a public debate on devolution as part of Cornwall Councils Consultative Programme on approving the devolution agreement. Cornwall is one of a number of areas that is including a devolved NHS budget for social and health care. However, council speakers as well as the audience raised many concerns as to how this devolution could work in setting up a Health and Social Care service when there would be neither full professional guidance, nor guarantees from the government to fund the right of all to health care.

This is a familiar picture across the country, but the context of this opposition is that government-driven “devolution” is both the continued attempt to deny the right to full sovereignty for Scotland, Wales and Ireland and at the same time further entrench the whole anti-

social neo-liberal direction in the cities and regions across the whole of Britain. This is being done under the guise of claiming to “devolve” Westminster powers to “elected Mayors” and asserting the creation of northern and southern “powerhouses”.

In his budget speech in March, Chancellor George Osborne tried to revive flagging support for the government’s devolution in the face of this opposition, which is being expressed even within his own party, by claiming that “the government is delivering the most radical devolution of power in modern British history”. He went on to try and claim that “the devolution revolution is taking hold”. In doing so he spelt out the real aim of this “devolution revolution” as he pointed out that when he became Chancellor “80% of local government funding came in largely ring-fenced grants from central government”. This he claimed was just the “illusion of local democracy” and he boasted that “by the end of this Parliament, 100% of local government resources will come from local government - raised locally, spent locally, invested locally”.

In other words, he openly outlined a direction for the Devolution Act that continues the massive cuts in government funding to local authorities, which has savaged the budgets of public services over many years and is the continued aim which he is championing.

The fact that previously most local authority funding came from central government grants with only about a quarter raised locally through council tax on local residential and business properties needs to be put in its real context. It is not an “illusion of local democracy” as claimed by George Osborne.

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The Line of March

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Attack on Ian Lavery and the NUM - From page 1

unions and to be left to fend for themselves and at the mercy of further assaults on their livelihood and communities by the rich and their government.

This campaign is similar to the campaign that has been conducted against the Durham Miners Association for a number of years. Its aim is to discredit the resistance and organisation of the NUM and its leaders in the face of unprecedented difficulties they face in organising when thousands of miners were thrown out of work and the paid membership of the NUM plummeted. It is the same situation now being faced by steel workers and public service workers who are being thrown out of work in their tens of thousands. Such a campaign also has to be seen in the whole context of the attacks going on in the working class movement, including the imposition of the Trade Union Bill to attack them and to leave workers without the means to resist and the right to organise. It is also aimed at sabotaging the gains made in breaking the mould of the pro-austerity consensus in Parliament with Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party and Ian Lavery as the Shadow Minister for Trade unions and Civil Society and a leading opponent of the government's Trade Union Bill and its anti-social agenda.

These allegations against Ian Lavery and the NUM Northumberland Area have been made by sections of the press and some in the Labour Party. The *Sunday Times* claimed to have examined the financial records of the Northumberland Branch of the NUM for the period from 1996 to 2010, when Ian Lavery was its general secretary. This seems to clearly indicate the aim to pinpoint their smear campaign against Ian Lavery. They then set out publicly to assert that the NUM was a bad union and to allege that Ian Lavery and the union had profited from compensation paid to sick and injured miners. They claimed that NUM had "profited" from "£1.6 million....payments and loan write-offs were made by a tiny union made rather wealthy from the compensation paid to coal miners who suffered from chronic illness." Yet they failed to reveal the real facts that followed the closure of the mines in Northumberland, Durham and elsewhere, where thousands of miners were thrown out of

work, no longer able to pay union dues. The union carried on representing them by asking for voluntary contributions from compensation claims that they won along with the union's solicitors. This is one of the ways ex-miners and their families have managed to maintain a highly professional and dedicated trade union following the decimation of their industry.

Ian Lavery, who was also National President of the NUM from 2002-2010, defended his actions and the actions of the NUM when he said: "We represented tens of thousands of former miners and succeeded in bringing in tens of millions of pounds in compensation and reduced earnings allowances. That has been a lifeline for these former miners and their families. That £1.6 million was received is both testament to the generosity and comradeship of those in the community, but also to the work of the union which brought tens of thousands of successful claims."

"The recent attacks in the media have failed to represent the work that I am proud as a full time official to have played a part in. The biggest criticism would appear to be the fact the NUM employed its officials on excellent wages, terms and conditions. This is something the union fought for all of its existence and something that we can rightly be proud of. My wages, terms and conditions were set according to union agreements and I was privileged to be well paid for a job I loved."

Nationally, the compensation scheme for conditions such as pneumoconiosis and vibration white finger had paid out £4.1 billion by 2010 and a lot of that is down to the persistence of NUM officials like Ian Lavery. Without setting out and fighting test cases in which the NUM risked millions of pounds none of these compensation claims could have been won. In other words, this is the issue that is sticking in the throat of those that want to discredit Ian Lavery and the NUM. With the increasing destruction of manufacturing industries, such as steel as well as also the increasing closure of public services the ruling elite cannot stomach the fact that people will continue to resist and organise in their trade unions and professionalise them so that they can take on

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Quite the opposite. The “ring fenced grants” are a claim on central public authority, i.e. the government, to meet the needs of every community from the claim of central government to social wealth in the form of taxes. Taxes are taken from people in every community, council borough and workplace via income tax, corporation tax, purchase tax (VAT) and national insurance. This is distributed to local borough councils through what is described as “ring fenced grants”. In distributing this central funding, George Osborne presents this funding to local authorities as if it is a “cost and burden” to the national treasury and the people of the country. This is all part of the government’s fraudulent pretext in doing away with “big government” and the “nanny state” and other such pronouncements which are aimed at trying to increase the claim of pay-the-rich schemes from the overall taxation, whilst removing the claim of local authorities for public services and thereby excluding the welfare of the people.

The Devolution Act is part and parcel of the government’s abrogating its responsibility to provide and maintain modern public services for all the people who live and work in every part of the country through redistribution of the social wealth of society that it has claimed. This is to be replaced by an “elected Mayor” with some paltry grant (£30 million a year in the case of the North East Mayor) that have “extra powers to add a premium to rates” to pay for “new infrastructure projects” and also the “borrowing of funds”, but

only provided the Mayor has “business support”. In other words, having cut 80% of the claims of local authorities from central government “grants” the people are to face increased taxes with the real illusion of democracy being an “elected Mayor” who is in partnership with big business and the ruling elite in each area.

The plan of the government to impose its Cities and Local Government Devolution Act with its elected Mayor has nothing to do with empowering the people of the regions and respecting their decisions to run their own affairs but has the aim at entrenching further the destruction of public authority and further take forward the anti-social direction for society and for the economy in the interests of the monopolies. It underlines also that what is needed is a modern system of the raising and the expenditure of public funds, a system that does not put the burden on working people as individuals.

The alternative to the government’s fraudulent and hypocritical “devolution” is the fight for democratic renewal, to replace all these anachronistic institutions and arrangements of the state with modern ones that recognise the sovereignty of Scotland, Wales and Ireland, uphold public authority, defend the rights of all and empower the people to make the decisions in society. □

Attack on Ian Lavery - From 3

the British state and the anti-social measures of the British government with its pro-austerity agenda.

What is hated by the ruling elite is the fact that the National Union of Mineworkers, in Durham, in Northumberland, in Yorkshire, and elsewhere has done precisely that and maintained highly professional organisations which continue to fight them tooth and nail not only in the courts and tribunals but continue to organise huge political manifestations of the workers such as in the Durham Miners Gala and Big Meeting. And in continuing to fight for the interests of the mining communities and in defending their interests and traditions they are also inspiring future generations of workers to fight for and defend the rights of all.

NEWP calls on the working class and people to add their voices against this vindictive campaign against Ian Lavery and on the NUM. The issue is not to be blown off course by such smears whose aim is to sow doubt, cause divisions and deflect everyone from fighting for what is theirs by right. The organised resistance in the ex-mining communities and in the whole working class must continue to be strengthened. We call on everyone to go all out to ensure that the fraudulent, anti-worker and anti-social “austerity” programme of the government is defeated. □

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