

COUNCILS PREPARE CUTS THOUSANDS OF JOBS AT RISK

by Caroline Colebrook

LOCAL authorities throughout Britain are planning to make cuts of about 10 per cent in their workforce, anticipating huge budget cuts after the coming election. Estimates of the number of jobs at risk range from 25,000 to 170,000.

But local government unions are accusing the councils of going overboard and threatening totally unnecessary levels of cuts.

The estimate of job cuts is based a survey of 49 councils with a combined workforce of 256,000. And behind the scenes councils are reported to be preparing for cuts of 15 per cent over the next three years. Cuts like this would be needed, they calculate, to reduce the £178 billion public deficit drawn up by the Institute of Fiscal Studies.

Dame Margaret Eaton, who chairs the Local Government Association (LGA), which represents English and Welsh local authorities, said local authorities were being hit by "a perfect storm" in the recession with increasing pressure on their services and threatened budget cuts.

Some are already cutting supplies of biscuits to

meetings and turning off street lighting in the middle of the night. But cuts like these are dismissed as inadequate gestures. Councils say only real cuts in jobs and services will balance the books if, as expected, funding from central government is sharply cut back.

The extent of the cuts will depend on who wins the election.

predicted

More than 70 per cent of councils in England that responded to the survey predicted spending cuts of between five per cent and 20 per cent.

Roads, libraries, the arts and leisure appear most at risk of cutbacks. Children's social services, services for the homeless and planning appear to be safest.

Last week Birmingham City Council an-

nounced plans to cut 2,000 jobs, freeze staff pay and cut services.

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, John Denham, confirmed that council will face spending cuts but the Government has drawn up guidelines to "help" them cut without damaging frontline services. These guidelines include suggesting different services share the same buildings and avoiding duplication of services between local and central government.

Public sector union Unison described the proposed cuts as "politically motivated". General Secretary Dave Prentis accused local authorities of acting politically in cutting budgets and declaring job cuts of tens of thousands over the next few years, when they didn't have to.

He said: "Councils' decisions to cut spending, freeze council tax and cut jobs are politically motivated. For 2010-2011, councils have received an extra four per cent from the Government and the majority have billions of pounds



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in unallocated reserves. "And our members have helped save billions in efficiency savings over the past few years. The Government called for three per cent efficiency savings, but councils have been making more than seven per cent savings and pocketing the money.

"Freezing council tax is a political gimmick. It may mean individual savings of a few pounds, but the overall impact on services will be greater. Local businesses rely on councils to

thrive, council workers spend their money in their areas and vulnerable people rely on the council to help them through the recession. Cutting jobs makes no sense at all."

scaremongering

The giant union Unite said that threatening massive job cuts was "scaremongering".

Gail Cartmail, Unite assistant general secretary for the public sector, said: "Following the bruising weekend opinion polls for David Cameron, the Tory-dominated county councils are now showing their true colours.

"These authorities are planning or already implementing cuts to jobs and services in a year when they have received a four per cent growth in funding from central government.

"It is a con and scaremongering tactics to make people believe that somehow it is all right to accept that much cherished local services, such as their local library or nursery, are now somehow ripe to be targeted for the axe.

"What the Conservatives – and the right-wing economists who support them – fail to realise is that local government in particular, and the public sector generally, are economic generators in their own right.

"In a number of cities as many as two thirds of the economically active are employed in the public sector and the impact of such cuts would be devastating to local economies.

"The reason that local government provides such services as roads, libraries, the arts and leisure services, which appear to be top of the list for these cuts, is that there is a long-standing demand for them – they are valued by their local communities.

"The honoured framework of local government, built up decade by decade by the Victorians, is now going to be the latest victim of the hedge-fund mentality of modern Conservatism, should David Cameron gain power."

The BBC survey was sent to 150 chief executives of county and unitary councils and metropolitan and London boroughs. District councils were excluded.

FUND

Supporters rallied to the call last week to finish off the February appeal and with £800 in the bag we managed to hit our £3,000 target with a few pounds to spare! The grand total for February came to £3,004 thanks to the regular donations from bankers orders and readers all over the country including Sheffield and Swansea friends who both put tenners in the post.

This was matched by a friend of Democratic Korea in south London while another London supporter, a veteran from Redbridge, sent in a score. A Manchester comrade posted a fiver and a Carlisle reader made a £3 donation while Southall NCP raised £30 at a recent meeting.

The March fighting fund starts this week with a £3,000 target that we can and must hit every month to guarantee the survival and expansion of the *New Worker*. Your support is vital in the struggle for peace and socialism. Big or small it all counts so please send your donations to: *New Worker Fund*, PO Box 73, London SW11 2PQ.

Iraq: 'resistance the only way'

by our Arab Affairs correspondent

SCORES of Iraqis were killed or wounded in a series of bombings in the central Iraqi city of Baquba on Wednesday as renewed violence swept across the occupied Arab country in the run-up to sectarian elections, organised by the puppet government. Tens of thousands of puppet police and troops have been deployed in the face of increased partisan attacks to ensure that the elections go ahead on 7th March.

The puppet Al Maliki government is working hard to promote next week's fraudulent elections to gain Arab and international credibility in a climate of renewed vio-

lence from the resistance and the sectarian militias who are trying to influence the vote.

While there is little doubt that the vote will produce another parliament dominated by sectarian and pro-Iranian Shia Muslim parties, the puppet government is trying to counter Baathist and nationalist resistance calls for a boycott by purging hundreds of civil servants accused of being former members of Saddam Hussein's party, meanwhile reinstating 20,000 Iraqi army officers who were dismissed by the American military authorities immediately after the fall of Baghdad in April 2003.

While rival Shia and Sunni militias have returned to sectarian violence, the Baathist-led resistance has concentrated its fire on the Americans and their puppets. Last month partisans

rocketed the heavily-defended Green Zone military compound in the centre of the capital and shelled a US army HQ in north-eastern Baghdad, while guerrillas stepped up their attacks on police stations and US bases.

withdrawal

The partial evacuation and the withdrawal of the remainder of the US troops to their bases in Iraq has led to a dramatic reduction in American casualties over the past year. US General David Petraeus, who oversees the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, told reporters on Monday that attacks in Iraq have dropped from an average of 220 per day at the height of the violence to less than 20 a day over the last six months.

But 98,000 US troops remain in Iraq and, according

to the Pentagon, at least 4,380 US military personnel have died since the Iraq war began in March 2003 and a further 31,706 have been wounded in action.

Leading Sunni cleric, Sheikh Harith al Dhari, in a recent interview with the Egyptian weekly *Al-Ahram al Arabi*, once again stressed that the armed struggle was the only alternative for the Iraqi people.

The Secretary-General of the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq (AMSI) pointed out that the current political process has failed, leaving no way to liberate Iraq except through the heroic Iraqi resistance and power. "Because what is taken by force can only be restored by force" he declared.