

VOTE YES ON 3 MARCH

On 3rd March, the people of Wales will be asked to vote on whether our National Assembly should have increased powers to make legislation. Welsh Labour Grassroots (WLG) – the organisation of left and centre-left activists in the Welsh Labour party – is strongly supporting the ‘yes’ campaign in this referendum.

The proposal that is to be decided upon on 3rd March is, in many ways, a modest one. It will **not** increase the number of AMs. It will **not** extend the Assembly’s responsibility into new areas like justice or defence. And it will **not** create new tax-raising powers or address the chronic underfunding of Welsh public services under the ‘Barnett formula’. It will simply enable the Assembly to pass legislation in the areas for which it already has responsibility, without needing the approval of the UK Parliament. In other words, *laws that apply only in Wales will be made in Wales*.

At present, the National Assembly cannot pass legislation in the same way that the London and Edinburgh parliaments can. So, even though the Assembly has responsibility within Wales for important areas of government policy like health and education, it does not have the authority to make laws relating to these areas. Since 2007, the Assembly has been able, in principle, to pass its own laws (called ‘Assembly Measures’) but each time it wants to do so, it must get the UK Parliament’s permission by using a mechanism known as a ‘Legislative Competence Order’. This involves a highly complex process, with 27 separate stages, and has taken up to three years when MPs have been reluctant, for political reasons, to grant the Assembly the powers it has asked for. Thus, after existing for twelve years, the Assembly is still dependent on Westminster to make decisions in areas for which Wales is supposedly responsible – and it is potentially subject to a political veto by London MPs and members of the unelected House of Lords.

There are two main reasons why socialists should be concerned about this state of affairs:

- First of all, as citizens of Wales, we should be concerned that when we elect Assembly Members to decide Welsh government policy on devolved issues, such decisions are subject to the approval of politicians from elsewhere in the UK – and, moreover, that obtaining such approval can waste enormous amounts of time and public money. Giving the Assembly full law-making powers over already-devolved matters would be more democratic and more efficient than the existing arrangements.
- The second reason to vote ‘yes’ is that the political consensus in Wales is more favourable to trade unions and to public services than that in the UK overall. We now have a government in Westminster that is determined to carry out the deepest public spending cuts since the Second World War – cuts that could cost hundreds of thousands of jobs, wreck public services and thrust the economy back into recession. Even with the additional powers on offer in this referendum, there is a limit to what the Welsh Assembly could do about this threat, given its limited powers in financial and other areas – but it could at least provide, more robustly than at present, one valuable line of defence for the people of Wales. Working together with unions and other civic organisations, it could mount an effective political challenge to the UK government’s plans and start to develop an alternative vision for Wales.

In March 1979, the people of Wales voted overwhelmingly to reject the proposal for a Welsh Assembly. Two months later, the Thatcher government took office and began to wreak havoc on the economy and society of Wales, along with many other parts of the UK. It cut public spending when the economy was already in recession, driving up unemployment and forcing many manufacturing companies out of business. Benefits were slashed and union rights taken away. The steel industry saw huge job cuts and eventual privatisation, and a pit closure programme ripped the heart out of many Welsh mining communities. The Tories never won even a third of the votes in Wales, yet the Welsh people had no protection against damaging Tory policies for which most of them had never voted. It took the bitter experience of the 1980s and 1990s for many people began to see the value of having an elected Assembly that would stand up for the interests of Wales. With Thatcher’s heirs now in Downing Street, we cannot afford to repeat the mistake of March 1979.

Vote YES on 3rd March!