

UK public sector stages national one-day walkout

For a general strike to bring down the Cameron government!

By Socialist Equality Party (UK)
30 November 2011

More than two million workers across the public sector in the UK are taking part in today's Day of Action against the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition's attack on their pensions. For the first time since the government took office 18 months ago, working people have the opportunity to show their opposition to its policies, and they are doing so in their hundreds of thousands.

Schools, hospitals, government offices, airports and all areas of essential provision are affected by the national walkout, as public sector workers make clear they will not accept plans to make them work longer and pay more for even less when they retire.

Their anger is entirely justified. The assault on pensions is the latest in a series of attacks that dates back to the public-sector wage freeze, first imposed under Labour. In March this year, local authorities told more than 100,000 employees they would be laid off unless they accepted the ripping up of their contracts and the imposition of new and worse conditions.

Even so, more than 100,000 public sector jobs were lost in the three months up to June, while in councils such as Southampton wage cuts of 5 percent and more have been imposed.

That is why today's one-day strike has attracted such support. Everyone involved knows that unless a determined stand is made, not a single job, not a single wage rate or condition of employment is safe. They understand that the attack on the public sector has nothing to do with the government's lying claims that its employees enjoy "special privileges". Rather, it is integral to the coalition's multi-billion-pound austerity programme and draconian cuts in essential social provision.

The Institute for Fiscal Studies states that Britain faces the "longest, deepest sustained period of cuts to public services spending at least since World War II."

Education spending is to fall by 14.4 percent over the next four years, while the National Health Service is threatened with collapse. The government is using the lack of funds to justify pressing ahead with the privatisation of education and health care through "free" schools and the "mutualisation" of areas of health provision.

The two-year assault on the public sector has given the green light for employers to drive down wages across the board. It has led to a situation where in the construction industry, for example, electricians face cuts in their wages of up to a third as companies seek to overturn national agreements.

This is only the start. Unemployment is at a 17-year high and for youth it is the highest on record, with more than one in five 16- to 24-year-olds jobless. The government's Welfare Reform Bill is intended to strip many—including the sick and disabled—of their benefit entitlements and force people into unpaid work to depress wage rates still further.

Despite all the pleas from the Trades Union Congress, the government insists it will not retreat over pensions. It fears that any concession, no matter how small, will embolden workers in every sector to challenge its policies.

Instead, it claims that the current level of pension provision can no longer be afforded, denounces today's action for holding the country "to ransom", and says it is considering new laws making it mandatory for more than half of the work force to vote in favour before a strike can go ahead.

This comes from the same elite that have made available £1 trillion of public funds for various “stimulus” packages to the banks since 2008. Only last month, the Bank of England handed over another £75 billion. Not once has the “affordability” of these massive subventions to the super-rich been put to the vote. As for democratic mandates, if the same criteria suggested for strike ballots were applied to the official parties, none would be in office today.

In all fundamentals, there is nothing to distinguish the set-up in Britain from the overturning of democratic norms now underway across Europe. The coalition is just as much a bankers’ government as the “technocratic” administrations installed over the heads of the populations of Greece and Italy.

In every country, working people face the same universal problems—growing unemployment, rising social inequality and a political system that is completely impervious to the demands and interests of the vast majority of the population. Everywhere, the same super-rich elite whose criminal and speculative activities caused the financial crisis get richer, while working people are made to pay the cost.

Economic inequality is the highest on record in Britain, but is set to worsen dramatically. Take-home pay has fallen for 11 consecutive months, with overall pay growth at just 0.4 percent while inflation is at 5 percent. Wage rates have fallen especially heavily amongst the lowest-paid, by between 4 and 11 percent in several sectors. In the meantime, the earnings of chief executives and directors of the major corporations have risen by 15 percent in the last year, and amongst senior corporate managers by more than 7 percent. Top executives now earn 145 times as much as the average worker.

This situation would not be changed one iota by Labour. It was the Labour government that first set forward plans to raise workers’ pension contributions in the public sector. And the government’s own measures are based on the recommendation of former Labour government minister John Hutton. In major cities, Labour-controlled authorities are carrying out mass redundancies and wage cuts.

Today’s action is a start in defeating this offensive, but it is not nearly enough. Events have shown that there is no limit to the rapacious demands of the financial oligarchy.

However, no one should be in any doubt that, having been forced to make a show of opposition to the latest attack on pensions, the trade unions’ efforts to strike a deal with the government will be realised at the expense of their members and all working people. The TUC and the trade unions long ago ceased to be genuine organisations of the working class and are directly responsible for the terrible situation now facing working people.

What is needed is to mobilise the collective strength of the working class in a general strike. New rank-and-file organisations must be built—independent of the trade union and labour bureaucracy—to unite all sections of the working class in a common fight to bring down the government.

The struggle now unfolding in Britain is part of a developing counteroffensive by the working class of Europe, Egypt, the United States and throughout the world against the ruling elite. International unity must be made the conscious aim of British workers and youth.

This is a political struggle that must proceed from the recognition that capitalism has failed. It is not a question of exchanging one set of capitalist politicians with another, but of replacing the system in its entirety through the formation of a workers’ government. The billions given over to the banks and the super-rich must be returned immediately and used to meet the basic needs of the population as part of the reorganisation of all aspects of social and economic life along socialist lines.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>