

UK pensions fight sabotaged as just three unions urge one-day strike

By Tony Robson
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Just three public sector unions have agreed to hold a consultative ballot on national strike on March 28. The action is in opposition to the government's attack on the civil service and teachers pension schemes.

This is a major capitulation by the trade unions, following the November 30 action that involved 2.5 million workers in some 20 unions.

Only the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the University and College Union (UCU) are to ballot. The token character of their own proposed action means any strike would be held just four days before the latest phase of the government's attack on public sector pensions takes effect, on April 1, with the increase in employee contributions.

The pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) occupy leading positions within these unions. Their overriding aim is to buttress the authority of the union bureaucracy over an increasingly discontented membership. Having praised the Trades Union Congress and proclaimed the November 30 action as a springboard for the revival of the unions as "fighting" organisations, the SP and SWP are mounting a damage limitation exercise.

The TUC announced on December 20 that it had called off further strike action for negotiations. Together with other unions, it worked to divide public sector workers along sectional lines, with separate "scheme-specific" talks on pension schemes largely involving secondary issues. So far, only the PCS, NUT, UCU and Unite have not signed up to the Heads of Agreement (HofA), based upon the scheme-specific negotiations that all the unions participated in from early November.

The government has made clear that there will be no retreat from its insistence that public sector workers

should work longer and pay higher contributions for less money on retirement. So sops on contribution rates in local government and the health service were used to oppose further strikes.

The GMB and Unison are now seeking to impose this sell-out through negotiations and a ballot that will not be completed until April. In the case of Unison, this removed its 1.3 million members in health, local government and education directly from any unified strike action, enabling the government to try to pick off teachers and civil servants.

The union bureaucracy's sole preoccupation has been to preserve its privileged position in bargaining away the past gains of the working class and heading off a broader confrontation against the government and its austerity programme.

The SP and the SWP conceal this by describing the unions that have failed to sign the HofA as "rejectionist" unions, who can be relied on to keep the "momentum going" against the government. They glorify the most minimal action as a way forward. The SWP stated, "But a strike doesn't need to have millions taking part in order to be effective. If teachers strike and shut down schools, for example, it has a huge impact.... At the very least it would give confidence to other workers *to put pressure on their union leaders* to call a strike too" (emphasis added).

The SP states that even if strike action is smaller than on November 30, it "could act as a lever on Unison and the GMB who could be balloting their members in health and local government's offer at the same time."

The truth is that the TUC betrayal of the public sector pension struggle has cleared the way for the government to proceed with an attack that will have devastating implications for millions. The fight to mobilise the collective opposition of the working class

against this can only proceed through an implacable struggle against the entire trade union bureaucracy, which the SP and SWP are determined to oppose by acting as cheerleaders for the few union leaders still striking a left pose.

The minority of unions that have formally rejected the framework agreements are committed to absolutely nothing. Unite had originally agreed to the HofAs on December 20, only belatedly withdrawing its endorsement when it became clear this would have discredited it completely in the eyes of its members. It has ruled out participating in the joint action on March 28 on the pretext of holding a consultative ballot of its members in the health service, even though it acknowledges that no substantive changes have been made to the agreement. This ballot is delayed until today, February 20, the government deadline for pension negotiations to end.

The prospect of joint strike action on March 28 by PCS, NUT and UCU is being left as late as possible so that negotiations can continue with the government, in the hope of achieving some minor concessions to justify ending the dispute.

PCS general secretary Mark Serwortka has opposed setting any further dates for strike action on the grounds that this can only be done from a weakened position due to the acceptance of the HofA by the TUC majority. But he has no intention of mobilising against the TUC betrayal. Instead, the PCS has hailed its re-admittance into the talks on the HofA as a breakthrough, while admitting that the negotiations are based solely upon how the attacks are to be implemented.

As for the UCU, it recently suspended any further industrial action by lecturers in the Universities Superannuation Scheme. Its 50,000 members in the private scheme participated in the national strike on November 30. They have been engaged in “work to contract” industrial action against the imposition of changes to their pension scheme along the lines of the HofA—including increased retirement age, higher contributions and lower pensions. The UCU cited only the willingness of employers to negotiate by way of justification.

The pseudo-left groups define themselves ever more openly as the opponents of an incipient rebellion developing within the working class. This is epitomised

by *Socialist Worker* article, “Don’t leave the Unison stay and fight to get action put back on”.

SWP industrial organiser Michael Bradley notes with obvious concern, “The fallout from the unions’ response to the government’s ‘heads of agreement’ on pensions is still being felt. Why pay your subs to a union that won’t fight? Even before the events of recent weeks, some Unison activists had ‘gone over’ to other unions. Now the pensions deal has sparked a new round of Unison members quitting to join Unite.”

Bradley cautions cynically against the very illusions in “left” trade union leaders fostered at every turn by the SWP—but only to justify continued support for one layer of bureaucrats by citing the rottenness of the rest. He then targets his ire against those “workers impatient with the right wing leaders,” who might be contemplating “creating militant ‘red unions’.”

Any such attempt to challenge the union leaders’ betrayals, he insists, would lead only to a divided “union movement” and “isolate the most militant workers, helping the bosses.”

Such statements define the SWP and their ilk as a political police force, tasked with stifling any and all dissent that might shake off the deadly grip of the union bureaucracy from the neck of the working class.

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