

UK public sector workers hold one-day strike

By Julie Hyland
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Public sector workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland held a 24-hour strike on Thursday.

Six unions were involved in the action over pay and pensions. Unison, Unite, the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) and the GMB representing local government employees and civil servants, along with the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU).

Action by the PCS closed some courts and government offices in Scotland while members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) employed by Transport for London also struck in the capital.

Schools were most heavily affected by the dispute, with many—especially in London—wholly or partially closed, as teachers, teaching assistants and other staff walked out.

Libraries, museums, passport and tax offices, driving test centres and care centres were also impacted and refuse collections were suspended in several areas.

In addition to tens of thousands of job losses, public sector employees have been subject to a three-year pay freeze. On Wednesday, research commissioned by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) showed that this had left them poorer by an average of £2,245 (US\$3,846) in real terms since the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition took office in 2010.

The government is now restricting annual pay increases to just 1 percent for two years, effectively a further pay cut. In addition, the coalition is destroying retirement conditions—targeting teachers and firefighters especially, who are to be made to work longer and pay higher contributions for smaller pensions. It is for this reason that teachers made up the largest component of those participating at the main rally in London.

Just prior to the day of action, Conservative Minister Matthew Hancock said that pay would be curbed for four years, until at least 2018 if his party returned to

power in the 2015 general election. Pay restraint would have to remain in force until the government has “the books balanced”, he said.

His admission deepened anger over the government’s austerity measures, which are aimed at plundering the living standards and working conditions of millions in the interests of the super-rich. Britain now has the highest number of billionaires per capita in the world, with the five richest families in the UK wealthier than the poorest 20 percent of the population.

The trade unions’ day of action, however, is in no way aimed at mobilising working people against such vast and growing inequality, despite absurd claims by the TUC and its apologists in the fake-left Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party that Thursday’s action was the largest since the 1926 General Strike.

This assertion is based on the fact that the unions involved in yesterday’s strike have upwards of 1.1 million members, and is therefore similar to the 1.5 million or so who struck in 1926.

But such arithmetic not only ignores the fact that the 1926 General Strike, which lasted 10 days, paralysed the country and created a situation of dual power. It deliberately obscures that just a fraction of the membership of the unions involved on Thursday actively participated in the dispute.

Less than 30 percent of members in most of the unions involved returned their ballot papers. While the vast majority of those abstaining support a fight against the government’s cuts, and stayed away from work, they rightly have no confidence in the trade unions as a means of opposing them.

The last national day of action organised by the TUC was in November 2011, over public sector pensions. Workers had responded enthusiastically to what they hoped would be the start of a fightback, with an estimated 2 million involved. But behind the scenes, the unions had already decided on talks with the

government along sectional lines. The TUC quickly abandoned any further action, and the government was able to implement its plans without any significant changes.

The result was laid bare in the *Guardian* by Owen Jones, a journalist and professional political apologist for the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Detailing the collapse in workers' pay packets over the last years, he wrote, "If trade unions are not going to go on strike now, their leaders might as well clench their fists for the last time, bow solemnly before the sisters and brothers, and perform the last rites on their movement".

In reality, the unions as fighting organisations of the working class are long dead. Thursday's action was the minimum that could be organised, if the bureaucrats are to persuade the government that it needs their political and organisational assistance in policing the working class.

To this end the union tops have been at pains to make clear they have no intention of mobilising a genuine struggle against the coalition.

Speaking at the main rally in London, union leaders listed the horrors visited on the public sector without any apparent awareness that this was an indictment of their own role. But all they had to offer was pleas to the government for "meaningful talks".

Meanwhile, each of the unions involved in Thursday's action is pursuing a separate claim, while deliberately encouraging divisions between public and private sector workers.

Time and again, union leaders parroted the false claim that the UK economy was in recovery and the only problem was that public sector employees were "losing out" in sharing the benefits in comparison to private sector employees.

In fact, the attack on the public sector is symptomatic of a broader offensive against the conditions of the entire working class—employed and unemployed, young and old.

According to the Resolution Foundation think tank, the decline in wages could be 20 percent higher than official estimates if the 4.5 million people registered as self-employed are counted.

Some 80 percent of the net increase in jobs since 2008 has been in the low-pay private sector, such as retail, catering and leisure. Many of these are in precarious employment, including zero-hour contracts.

This has led to an increase in the numbers of people registering as self-employed, who now account for one in seven of the workforce, or 4.5 million people. The Resolution Foundation calculates that self-employed incomes have fallen by a massive 27 percent since the financial crash, which would mean that the decline in average wages is 12 percent, not the 10 percent previously calculated.

As for the Labour Party, it refused to support even this token strike. Jeremy Corbyn MP, one of a tiny handful of "lefts" in the party, was the only Labourite that could be found to address the central London rally. That is because Labour is committed to continuing the austerity measures, including pay cuts and freezes, making trade union leaders' pleas for the party's backing worthless.

For its part, the government intends to use the low number of votes cast to introduce harsher anti-union legislation. Noting that less than 20 percent of civil servants struck on Thursday, Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude said the Conservative Party will draw up laws to restrict the right of public sector unions to take industrial action if their mandates were "weak".

The response of Mick Cash, RMT acting general secretary, was typical of the union leaders' real concern at such anti-democratic measures. Making strikes illegal and almost impossible, he warned, would lead to workers taking "matters into their own hands".

This could lead to "highly disruptive wildcat action called at very short or no notice".

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