

British Broadcasting Corporation employees strike over job cuts

Our correspondent
27 May 2005

Employees of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) struck for 24 hours on May 23, in protest at plans to cut 3,780 jobs and privatise sections of the corporation. A 48-hour strike is planned for May 31 and June 1.

The three unions involved—the broadcasting union Bectu, the National Union of Journalists and the white-collar and technical union Amicus—reported that 55 percent of members had participated in Monday's strike. Throughout the day picket lines were mounted outside Bush House in Central London, TV Centre in White City and Broadcasting House.

Several radio and television programmes were cancelled. The BBC's live shows, such as TV's "News 24" and "Radio Five Live" were hardest hit, with the latter broadcasting repeats. The English-language BBC World Service was also affected, as its live programming was replaced with five-minute news bulletins every 30 minutes. BBC One's news bulletin at 1300 was simulcast with "News 24" without its usual presenters or local news, whilst BBC Radio 4 cancelled such flagship programmes as "Today."

The job cuts represent almost one in five of all BBC employees in the UK public service division. Approximately 2,050 jobs will be cut from content and output areas and a further 1,730 from the behind-the-scenes Professional Services by 2008. The Professional Services is being cut by 46 percent, but most departments stand to lose between 10 to 20 percent of their employees.

BBC Director General Mark Thompson announced the plans on March 10, claiming that they were necessary for the corporation to meet up to hi-tech changes in broadcasting and would save £355 million a year, which could then be reinvested in developing new programmes.

He emphasised the need for the BBC to be seen to provide value for money. Behind this imperative is the planned review of the BBC's state funding in 2016, paid for by a licence fee. The Labour government has been lobbied by private broadcasters, led by Rupert Murdoch, owner of News International and Sky satellite television, to end state funding of the BBC. The argument focuses on the fact that satellite and cable technology has rendered the concept of a national broadcaster obsolete and that the BBC must compete in the market place without favour.

The BBC has attempted to do precisely this, particularly with the launching of its Freeview service, offering a range of new digital channels for free. But this has only amplified the complaints of private broadcasters that the BBC is engaging in unfair competition.

The unions do not advance an alternative perspective to BBC management other than to assert that job cuts are incompatible with the provision of a quality service. However, they have indicated that a compromise can be reached providing only that there are no compulsory redundancies and that they are made party to whatever changes are made through "meaningful negotiations."

On Thursday, May 26, the unions met for talks with BBC management at the conciliation service ACAS. Bectu spokesman Luke Crawley said the union was "looking to compromise—I hope they've got the same spirit."

NUJ General Secretary Jeremy Dear said the next strike could be called off if "significant progress" were made during the talks. "We're hoping there will be a resolution to the dispute," he said, "We've come here with an open mind and prepared to negotiate and we hope that the BBC will too."

To date the BBC has taken a hard-line stance,

insisting that the cuts are non-negotiable.



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