

Britain: Local authority workers walk out over pay cut

Our reporters
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Action by the Unison and Unite unions has brought upwards of half a million council workers throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland out on a two-day strike.

The 48-hour action, which began yesterday, involves support workers in schools, leading to the closure of schools, and has affected nurseries, libraries, sports centres and museums. Refuse collection has been affected in many towns and cities. Hundreds of people intending to fly from Derry Airport in Northern Ireland were told to make alternative arrangements due to the strike.

The dispute is one of several involving local authority workers, including strikes by the National Union of Teachers, against the 2.45 percent pay offer imposed across the public sector by the Labour government of Gordon Brown.

In a Public and Commercial Service (PCS) union dispute, driving test examiners also struck yesterday, and Valuation Office Agency staff struck yesterday and today. Home Office and Land Registry workers will strike for part of Friday, coastguard control room staff for 48 hours from Friday, and the Identity and Passport Service for 72 hours from July 23.

London Underground cleaners also staged a protest outside City Hall. The Rail Maritime and Transport union said the cleaners were paid as little as £5.50 an hour. The “London Living Wage” is set at £7.45 an hour.

With official inflation figures generally cited by the government hitting a record high of 3.8 percent in June, this is a substantial pay cut. But this is only a partial picture.

A leaflet distributed by the Socialist Equality Party, “Local Government workers need new leadership to defend jobs and conditions,” points out that petrol has in fact risen 22 percent; bread is up 9 percent and fuel bills 15 percent.

The more accurate Retail Price Index inflation measure is currently 4.8 percent.

The SEP leaflet continues:

“Many of the workers involved in this dispute are already low paid. One third of local government workers earn less than £6.50 an hour.” Even so, “The unions are demanding a fairly minimal 6 percent or 50p an hour, whichever is the greater, which would itself not meet rising living costs.”

The leaflet notes that whereas the July 16 and 17 strike action is a response to the widespread hostility to the Labour government's imposition of a below-inflation pay offer, workers also face a daily struggle to manage workloads and directives that are bound up with increasing productivity. Local councils have also brought in performance related pay measures.

The leaflet explains:

“The past decades have seen the wholesale privatisation of local government services in the areas of housing, education, refuse, direct works, finance and IT. In the most recent period, the merging of education and social services has led to cuts in vital services....

“A report by the Audit Commission, published last month, made clear the difficulties faced by many authorities in recruiting sufficient numbers

of key professionals because of poor pay and conditions:

“Local authority jobs facing recruitment difficulties include social workers and social carers, occupational therapists, environmental health practitioners, planners and educational psychologists. There is even a shortage of School Crossing Patrols.

“The further erosion of pay and conditions can only exacerbate this situation.

“The government has made it clear that there will be no respite in attempts to further privatise already depleted services. A report to be published shortly, commissioned by the Department of Business, examines methods of ‘increasing the role of private and third sectors [e.g., Charities]’ in providing local government services.

“A recent Times article stated that the deepening ‘economic downturn’ will mean the loss of thousands of jobs over the next two years. The newspaper said, ‘Some 20,000 jobs were cut from central and local government and publicly owned businesses in the first three months of the year, pushing the total number to 39,000 in the year to March.’ “

Despite these appalling conditions, the vote for strike action was relatively low. Out of a total membership of 600,000, only around 151,000 Unison members cast a vote in the ballot. Of these, around 55 percent voted in favour of strike action. As yesterday's turnout proved, this is not indicative of a lack of anger and determination amongst workers. It was rather a vote of no confidence in the union leadership's readiness and capacity to conduct a successful struggle. The SEP explains:

“Despite calling the strike, the union heads have done their utmost to minimise its impact. The two unions have done nothing to co-ordinate their action with other sections of workers, such as teachers in the National Union of Teachers, who took action recently over the same issue.

“The radical groups such as the Socialist Workers Party, as well as the media routinely claim that Britain is facing a re-run of the upsurge of industrial militancy witnessed at the end of the 1970s—a ‘Summer of Discontent’ to rival the 1978-79 ‘Winter of Discontent.’

“However, it is now almost three decades since those earlier struggles, which was also a movement against a Labour government seeking to impose pay restraint. Even that dispute, bereft of a perspective on which to combat Labour's attacks politically, culminated in the election of the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher.

“And what has happened in the decades since then?”

“Not a single significant industrial dispute has been won under the leadership of the trade union bureaucracy. Instead there has been a historically unprecedented chain of defeats under successive Tory and Labour governments.

“Today, the unions almost inevitably sabotage even the minimal protest actions they are forced to take, while prioritising at all times their cozy relations with management. Nowhere is this more developed than in the local authorities, where the union bureaucrats rub shoulders with their Labour Party colleagues.

“Deserted by many of its big business backers, Labour relies on the

trade unions for its funds. Since the beginning of 2001, the unions have given £55 million to Labour— £8.5million in 2006 alone, fully 70 percent of the total. They have now promised a massive increase in order to save the party from bankruptcy.

“Yet all they are asking for in return is a greater say in policy-making for themselves, minimal improvements in workplace regulations and measures to make easier union recruitment. They are not even prepared to cut off Labour’s finances unless they scrap pay restraint and hike up the taxes on business and the super rich that have been constantly slashed since 1997.”

The leaflet concluded:

“The rapidly deteriorating global economic crisis will indeed throw millions of workers into a struggle to defend their existing jobs and living conditions. But what form will this struggle take?”

“Workers must begin to take the initiative. They must build their own independent rank-and-file organisations of struggle, representing their interests and not those of a well-heeled bureaucracy. This means breaking from the trades unions and the Labour government they defend and building a genuine socialist leadership.”

The contrast between the union’s desire for compromise and the intransigence of the Local authority employers and the government was apparent on the first day of the dispute.

Dave Prentis, general secretary of Unison, called for local government employers to use their £3 billion reserves garnered through “efficiency savings made by our members” to settle the dispute, adding that “There is no need to ask the Government for more.”

Unite national officer Peter Allenson also blamed local government employers for the dispute, before stating meekly, “Neither though can central government sit on the sidelines doing nothing.”

This dispute is directed against an official government policy of pay restraint. Yet the union leaders do everything possible to take the heat off Gordon Brown, even as the strike is in progress. Far from “doing nothing,” Chancellor Alistair Darling insisted as the strike began that “Whether you are in the private sector or the public sector, whether you are sitting in the boardroom or working on the shopfloor, we cannot allow inflationary wage increases.”

A series of rallies were held by council workers across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, including Norwich, Cambridge, Leicester, London, Newcastle, Belfast, Portsmouth, Brighton, Bristol, Cardiff, Swansea, Sheffield and York. A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers demonstrating in Sheffield.

Brian, who works for Sheffield City Council cleansing department, said, “We have got to get back to the kind of spirit we had in the 1970s, but there are not so many public sector workers to do it. We have lost a lot of jobs. When it changed to DSOs (Direct Service Organisations), it dispersed the workforce. If we get 6 percent we will have done well, but I don’t think we get that. The only way to win it would be by staying united.”

Fiona Hawkins, a social worker, explained that she had heard Unison head Dave Prentice on the radio. She was angry that he had begun the interview by saying, “We don’t want to be doing this, we are not like other workers, striking at the drop of a hat.

“Instead of doing that, he should have been attacking the government for spending the money on other things such as the proposed nine new nuclear power stations. This Labour government has chosen to starve the public sector since coming into office.”

Margaret, a dinner lady at a local primary school, said, “It would be more effective if all the unions were out on strike. I think we should get paid more money for lunch times. At the moment, I get paid for one and half hours a day. My monthly salary before deductions is £187 per month. I think we should get at least £50 a week. Some people only get six hours a week, and there are some who get even less. Who is going to break time

to work for less than one hour a day?”

“The closure of a lot of special schools and the policy of inclusion, where all children with extreme behavioral problems go into mainstream schools, means we have to deal with these children. We should get danger money. When I worked in a special school, we got paid an extra allowance.

“Staff are intimidated by management. At one local school, all the staff were out on strike, so the school was being closed. Human Resources instructed the schools to stay open even without first aiders, which is illegal.”

A teaching assistant from a local primary school explained, “It is about pay but is also about expectations. We are expected to take on more and more. We are under a lot of emotional pressure to do it—if you don’t, you feel guilty.”

A learning mentor added, “The ethics of the job has altered. You go into this work to work with children, but now it is all tier 3 work—to help children and families”(i.e., above the level learning mentors are paid at).

Another added, “Teaching assistants are expected to take on more and more duties that are normally done by teachers, but yet teaching assistants are the lowest-paid staff in the school.”

James, a cover supervisor at a secondary school, said, “It shouldn’t be just about wages but about helping people to progress out of low pay. There should be more active training so you can progress to become a Higher Learning Teaching Assistant, Learning Mentor or a teacher. They should get better training so people know they have got something to work for. In secondary schools, there are so many teaching assistants that are graduates or have worked in schools for a number of years and have a lot of experience and skills that are not being used. The Graduate Teaching Programme should be more easily available to those who want to train to be teachers.”

Katherine, a teacher in one of Sheffield’s Special schools, said her school was closed today “as it cannot function safely without teaching assistants.

“In our school, the teaching assistants carry huge responsibilities. Not just concerning the school. They support families. They provide a vital link between the school and the community. And for them to be offered 2.45 percent shows that the government has lost all sense of responsibility for local government workers. It shows that they are not in touch.

“Alistair Darling [the chancellor] says it’s okay for car drivers to have to pay an extra £200 put on their vehicles because ‘they change their cars every few years.’ But these local government workers can’t afford to change *their* cars every few years.

Matt works with people with severe learning disabilities. He said, “In effect, what the government has proposed is an elaborate pay cut. That’s why I’m here today. There’s been too much compromise in the past. I think a new leadership is a very good idea.”



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