

Britain: Civil servants strike for two days

Richard Tyler
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Civil servants are beginning a 48-hour walkout today against government attempts to seriously undermine their redundancy terms, the Civil Service Compensation Scheme (CSCS).

Faced with massive budget and fiscal shortfalls as a result of handing over billions to rescue the banks, the Labour government wants to reduce the cost of firing civil servants, or of transferring them to new privatised bodies, to the tune of £500 million.

According to the union, the new scheme being proposed would see some staff losing up to a third of their redundancy or early retirement entitlements. In some cases, this amounts to a loss of tens of thousands of pounds compared to the existing scheme.

The action on March 8 and 9 has been called by the largest civil service union, the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), representing some 260,000 workers across government departments and agencies. The bulk of PCS members work in administrative and lower executive grades.

In a ballot, over 60 percent of those voting had supported the strike call, with 81 percent support for an overtime ban. However, turnout was low, with 51,948 voting Yes (just under 20 percent of the membership) out of over 260,000 ballots issued.

The two-day walkout could close down both administrative centres and those providing direct services to the public, such as Job Centres, benefit and tax offices. Almost three quarters of civil servants work for the four largest departments: Department of Work and Pensions (including employment and social security), HMRC (dealing with tax and customs, as well as administering in-work benefits such as Working Families Tax Credits), Justice (courts and prisons) and Defence.

There are a number of marches and rallies planned across the UK, including in Glasgow, Cardiff and Belfast, with a rally in central London on Tuesday

March 9.

The government plans would rob many low-paid public employees of their existing redundancy entitlements. In 2008, some 100,000 civil servants earned £15,000 a year or less (19 percent of the workforce), with 73 percent earning below the national average wage of approximately £25,000. According to a PCS briefing document, under the new scheme anyone earning more than £20,000 will be worse off, affecting at least 40 percent of civil servants. In one example cited by the union, a 41-year-old civil servant with 20 years' service earning £24,000 would be £22,000 worse off if he or she were made redundant under the new scheme. Older workers with longer service stand to lose even greater sums, with the value of their pensions also being considerably lower.

Independent research commissioned by the PCS found that its members' "pay rates had been forced down over a period of time compared to other parts of the public and private sectors." But while pay for those on more junior grades has stagnated or fallen in recent years, the number of senior civil servants earning over £60,000 rose by 35 percent between 2000 and 2008. In contrast to their junior staff, pay for those at the top has risen by more than inflation, with generous "performance" bonuses also being paid to the top Whitehall mandarins. By the end of 2008, there were nearly 5,000 government bureaucrats in the very top pay bands—whose minimum salary is between £60,000 and £100,000, with the highest paid now earning in excess of £200,000.

Job cuts, outsourcing, privatisation and productivity hikes as the result of importing so-called "LEAN" management techniques have dramatically increased the pressure on civil servants, particularly those in front-line services, who also tend to be the lower paid. In June 2009, there were about 492,000 civil servants in post, including casuals. This has fallen from a 30-year

high of about 746,000 in 1977, and is down almost 100,000 in the last five years.

The PCS and its predecessors have done nothing to stem the tide of attacks on civil servants.

For the last 10 years, the PCS, the largest union representing civil servants, has been headed by General Secretary Mark Serwotka, a former member of Socialist Organiser.

A particularly insidious role is being played by the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party (SWP), which dominate the PCS leadership. Since 2002, the union's national executive committee (NEC) has been dominated by the Left Unity faction, including the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party. The PCS president and vice president, Janice Godrich and John McNally, are both members of the Socialist Party, and SWP member Sue Bond is also a vice president.

The PCS leadership is touting the strike as being in "defence of jobs" and has issued flyers saying that cuts in redundancy pay "would mean massive job cuts on the cheap." Its briefing paper states that "the more cuts in the CSCS, the more risk of job losses," since the existing scheme makes it too costly to impose mass sackings or privatisations. However, this is belied by the huge number of jobs that have already been axed over the last five years.

The CSCS was never about "defending jobs," but managing the restructuring of the civil service, a process that the PCS has supported. Indeed, the union even boasts that "The current CSCS terms have played a major role in helping PCS fight to avoid unnecessary compulsory redundancies by ensuring that there was a decent scheme in place, which many members have been able to take advantage of [sic]".

The PCS is merely seeking to use the strike as a means of pressuring the government to make a more reasonable offer and return to the negotiating table. As it states in its briefing paper, "the best timing for action, in order to exert maximum pressure on the government, would be during March before a general election."

In 2005, the supposedly "left" PCS leadership agreed to the introduction of a two-tier pension scheme. Although this preserved some conditions for existing staff, new starters joining the "Nuvos" scheme faced considerable worse benefits, both in terms of pensions and redundancy payments.

PCS national vice president John McNally, a

Socialist Party member, said, "PCS's hard negotiating stance based on members' support has already delivered concessions." But the concessions have mainly been made by the union to the detriment of its members.

Now, faced with the need to make massive cuts in public spending, the government wants to put all civil servants on the same (worse) terms of the "Nuvos" scheme.

What concerns the union bureaucracy is not the defence of its members' jobs and conditions, but that it should retain its privileged position as part of the co-management of the civil service. The union is not opposed to "efficiencies," but the manner in which they are introduced, particularly if it risks a rank-and-file rebellion. Serwotka recently told the press, "We have suggested ways in which the government can make these savings while protecting the rights of existing members."

Under conditions the government and employers are seeking to place the burden of the economic crisis onto the backs of working people, the petty bourgeois groups are seeking to tie workers to the failed politics of the trade unions.

In an article about the upcoming civil service strike, *Socialist Worker* boldly proclaims, "The Greek spirit of resistance will come to Britain next week when hundreds of thousands of civil service workers strike for two days," and that "thousands of workers will take on New Labour".

But the lesson of the "Greek events" is that in the hands of the trade unions such actions are merely meant to let off steam, while keeping the fight to defend jobs and conditions within safe limits that do not pose a threat to big business or the Labour Party as its political representative in government.



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