

# BBC journalists strike against pension cuts

Our reporters  
8 November 2010

Journalists staged a 48-hour strike, Friday and Saturday, at the BBC in opposition to proposed cuts to their pension scheme. They have now started an indefinite work to rule.

Another strike is set for November 15 and 16 and there is a threat of further industrial action over the Christmas period.

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ), which has 4,100 members at the BBC, voted by a 70 percent majority to reject the cuts, which management says are needed to tackle a pension deficit of more than £1.5 billion.

An NUJ spokesperson said journalists would have to “pay more, work longer and receive lower pensions”. General Secretary Jeremy Dear declared, “NUJ members across the BBC have consistently dubbed the proposals a pensions robbery.”

A journalist picketing the BBC’s White City centre in London explained to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, “The BBC wants to dismantle the final salary pension scheme and has offered a career average scheme as a replacement. It offers little protection against the ravages of inflation. The staff are being asked to pay for what has been the largesse of BBC management over the last 10 to 20 years. They are all on six-figure salaries and massive pensions.

“It is the ordinary people at the BBC who are taking a massive hit. We think we are being used as a Trojan horse by the government, because if we accept the end of our pension scheme there is not much hope for the rest of the public sector. Next in the firing line will be council workers, teachers and civil servants.

“The BBC is doing these changes even though we don’t know the size of the deficit they say needs solving. The actuary’s report is not due until after Christmas. The size of the deficit has gone from £2 billion down to maybe one or £1.25 billion.

“We are disappointed the other major union at the BBC, Bectu—basically the technicians’ union—voted to accept

the consultative document. They were told by their leadership it was the best offer that could be achieved without, as was put at the meeting, ‘long and sustained’ industrial action.... We feel passionate and strongly about this and are prepared to stand out here. There is a wider point to this. There has been a lot of stuff about not making this a political strike. But you know most decisions in life are political. Of course, this is a political strike. There is no getting away from it.”

There was severe disruption to BBC news and current affairs programmes across the UK. Many TV and radio shows, including Radio 4’s “Today”, BBC2’s “Newsnight” and “BBC Breakfast” were suspended and replaced by pre-recorded items or severely curtailed and presented by scab replacements. News bulletins including the World at One and PM were cut to 10 minutes. Top news anchors including Jeremy Paxman, James Naughtie, Fiona Bruce, Paul Mason, Kirsty Wark, Huw Edwards and George Alagiah did not turn up for work. Newsnight political editor Michael Crick said, “I haven’t listened to the ‘Today’ programme. I regard listening to or watching the BBC as strike breaking.”

BBC foreign correspondents in Washington, Beijing, Lagos, Johannesburg and Kabul also joined the strike.

In London, journalists picketed the Television Centre, White City and Broadcasting House where the vast majority of BBC staff are employed. Strike action also took place at the corporation’s seven regional centres in Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leeds and Manchester and at numerous local offices.

In Scotland, “Good Morning Scotland” did not appear. Newsdrive’s Isabel Fraser, Newsweek’s Derek Bateman and correspondent James Cook were among those picketing the corporation’s Glasgow headquarters. Fraser said, “The vast majority of people at the BBC do not get large amounts of money. We are out today on a point of principle.”

The NUJ said the strike was “absolutely rock solid” among its 230 BBC Scotland members. “They just don’t have the capacity to get out the news,” said NUJ President

Peter Murray. “They don’t have the camera crews, they don’t have the producers and they don’t have the presenters... I don’t know of any of our members being in the building.”

In Wales, the main evening TV news show, “Wales Today”, was reduced from its normal 30 minutes to five. There were picket lines at BBC buildings around Wales, including the BBC’s Welsh headquarters in Llandaff.

Many well-known television and radio personalities, including Gareth Gordon and Vincent Kearney, stayed away from work in Northern Ireland, which led to the cancellation of programmes including “Good Morning Ulster”, “Talkback” and the Nolan shows. Dozens of workers stood on the picket line outside Blackstaff House.

Television news and radio programmes were disrupted across Greater Manchester, with the region’s flagship “North West Tonight” on air for just a few minutes with presenters Gordon Burns and Ranvir Singh refusing to front it. BBC Radio Manchester presenter Alan Beswick was on strike, as was Heather Stott who normally presents the morning radio programme. Strikers manned picket lines at the Oxford Road studios.

BBC Midlands “Today” presenters Suzanne Virdee and Nick Owen joined a Bonfire Night strike outside the Mailbox studios in Birmingham. One striker said, “We feel that this is all about getting rid of the final salary pension scheme and softening people up for further cuts. There are people who will lose up to £100,000 on this and will have to work longer to lose money. Why should we not try to do something about it?”

“We have had very few people cross the picket lines here in Birmingham. There is going to be real disruption—feelings are running very high.”

BBC journalists set up picket lines outside BBC Leeds in St Peter’s Square and at BBC Bristol in Whiteladies Road, where some Bectu members decided not to work.

Mark Thompson, BBC director general, denounced the strike and BBC director of business operations, Lucy Adams, said that the dispute was not likely to be settled soon. Last month, Thompson and the BBC Trust Chairman Sir Michael Lyons accepted government demands for a 16 percent cut in budget, a freeze on the licence fee for the next six years and to take over responsibility for the World Service and other channels. The government had threatened to transfer the £566 million cost of free TV licences for over-75s from the Department of Work and Pensions to the BBC.

Thompson’s handling of the pensions issue has been criticized by some of his associates at the top of the BBC.

Pensions Board chairman and BBC Trustee Jeremy Peat said the director general had failed to consult properly and that Trust members “were sidestepped” by management. Helen Boaden, BBC director of news, agreed, saying that “it would have been much, much better if the BBC had waited for the deficit to be properly assessed and then worked with the Trustees to come up with a viable long-term plan for addressing it.”

This is the line being peddled by the NUJ as it seeks to back down. Dear chimed in, “We don’t understand why the bosses can’t wait a few months until they know the actual figures.”

The NUJ’s intention is to make a deal as long as benefits are not reduced “significantly”, as Dear made clear when he said, “BBC journalists are not asking for higher pensions. They are not even saying they wouldn’t consider paying more or working longer for a fair pension settlement.”

Last month the NUJ cancelled a strike by BBC journalists planned for during the Conservative Party conference and on the day Chancellor George Osborne announced his comprehensive spending review. A press furore erupted, helped by a letter in the *Guardian* signed by 32 members of the BBC’s political staff at the Millbank offices. Despite the signatories being an insignificant minority—11 of them were reported not even to be NUJ members—and the fact that the overwhelming majority of NUJ members had chosen those dates, the executive backed down.



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