

Britain: The fraud of the upcoming “mass strike” in Britain

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On June 30 the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), University and Colleges Union (UCU) and the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) plan to hold a limited strike across England and Wales.

The unions involved routinely assert that the protest will involve up to 750,000 workers. But this figure, which is just 12 percent of the total public sector workforce, would only be met if the entire membership of the unions involved were counted. Actual participation will likely be far lower as the union bureaucracies attempt to strangle any genuine fightback by the working class against the government’s £81 billion austerity measures.

The unions balloted members in response to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government’s planned assault on public sector pensions. In line with the findings of the pension review led by Labour Peer Lord Hutton, the government intends to double employee contributions, increase the state pensionable age from 60 to 66, and link pensions to the Consumer Price Index, which grossly underestimates the inflation of living costs.

Last week’s ballot results reveal solid support for a genuine political and industrial struggle against the government’s spending cuts. The NUT, which has a 295,000 membership, registered a 92 percent vote in favour of strike action. Of the 160,000 ATL members who voted, 83 percent backed strike action. The PCS ballot returned a 61.1 percent vote in favour of strike action and 83.6 percent in favour of action short of strike action. The UCU balloted members earlier this year and received 95.5 percent backing for strike action.

However, a genuine struggle is precisely what the working class cannot expect from the trade union bureaucracy.

The protest strike has been devised by a number of ex-left

groups, principally the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP), which control a large portion of the executive positions in the NUT, PCS and the UCU. Their aim is to provide the trade union apparatus with a left cover and some desperately needed credibility, because no action whatsoever has been organised against the government’s attacks since the TUC’s protest in March—itsself the only action of any kind since the coalition came to power in May last year.

The sole aim of these elements is to prevent the emerging opposition within the working class from breaking out of the unions’ stranglehold.

The SWP is vigorously promoting June 30 as the “first steps to achieve a mass strike in Britain”, while the Socialist Party has proclaimed it “the first wave of coordinated action.” It is no such thing.

The one-day action has been arranged to cause as little disruption to the government as possible. And the major public sector unions, Unison, GMB and Unite, which collectively have around 3.5 million members, will not be involved.

On the supposed strike day, June 30, colleges and universities will in fact be closed, meaning that the further and higher education lecturers balloted will only be involved in a token protest. While civil servants working in job centres, courts and ports are to strike, local government and NHS workers, who are undergoing some of the most brutal social attacks, will be largely excluded.

Moreover, the trade unions intend to subordinate proceedings entirely to pressuring the government for minor concessions during the final pension negotiations, scheduled for June 28. When Unison General Secretary Dave Prentis was asked if the one-day strike, which his members will not join, was the beginning of a “summer of discontent”, he

replied, no, but possibly of an autumn of discontent!

Neither is on the cards, as far as the union heads are concerned. They have made clear that they will use the first hint of movement from the government to end any threat of a strike.

NUT General Secretary Christine Blower, who is closely aligned with the pseudo-left, has pointed to the benign nature of her union's plans, promising, "The NUT will continue to take part in the TUC-led negotiations."

Exposing the NUT's role in laying the basis for the current attack on pensions, she continued, "The NUT believes teachers' pensions are affordable ... The NUT agreed to changes in 2007 which increased contributions and retirement ages, capped employers' contributions and accepted that teachers might pay more in future if they need to."

The ATL, the self avowed "least militant education union", has referred to the strike as "a last resort." General Secretary Mary Boustead reassured the government that "the strike will be cancelled if there's any breakthrough in the talks."

The PCS, which has a majority "left" executive dominated by the Socialist Party, and is held up as one of the most militant unions in Britain, also offered the prospect of a climbdown in the event of "significant concessions from the government".

For their part the UCU, in which around half of the executive seats are held by the SWP-controlled UCU Left, have agreed only to mobilise a small section of their membership for the protest at a time when further and higher education institutions are on holiday. Even then it will be limited to protesting the dismantling of the Teachers Pension Scheme, which only covers members working in further education and universities founded after 1992!

The UCU has no intention of opposing the dismantling of pensions. It has already conceded to the government's demands on another major education pension, the Universities Superannuation Scheme. Its latest counterproposal agrees to the scrapping of the final salary scheme and its replacement with a much lower career average scheme, as well as its linking to the CPI. The UCU Left was forced to admit on its web site that the UCU's acceptance would be used by "the Government as an argument for other unions to accept."

Emboldened by the prostration of the unions, writing in the *Telegraph* on June 18, Danny Alexander, chief secretary to the Treasury, warned that it would be a "colossal mistake" to think such strike action would have any impact. He continued, "We will reform public service pensions" and threatened workers: "Our offer is by far the best that is likely to be on the table for years to come."

Even as the trade unions negotiate away workers' living standards, the ex-left fraternity tries to portray June 30 as a vehicle for leveraging the rest of trade union bureaucracy into organising a general strike in the autumn. Yet the UCU Left web site acknowledges that only the "UCU alongside the NUT, PCS, CWU (Communication Workers Union) and NUJ (National Union of Journalists)" have so much as called for the TUC to organise a general strike.

Unison has indicated that if the government does not change its course on pensions, it will ballot members for "sustained" industrial action later this autumn, when pension negotiations have concluded. But speaking to the *Financial Times*, Prentis made clear that he would limit any disruption to the government through "a rolling programme of strikes in individual regions, at particular employers and by specific groups of essential workers."

A glowing profile of Prentis, first published by the pro-Conservative *Telegraph* prior to the general election last May, and re-published this month on June 14, stated that "the Tories see him as someone who can work with them if they win power at the next general election."

It continues, "Richard Balfe, the former Labour [Member of the European Parliament] who was appointed by David Cameron to be the Conservatives' bridge with the unions earlier this year" says "Dave Prentis is the leader of a very important union that we need to relate to. Our aim is to open up a channel with him."



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