

Trade unions offer no way forward in fight against British government assault on pensions

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
30 June 2011

The condemnation heaped on today's strikes by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, leading members of the Labour Party and the media must not detract from one basic fact: Faced with the largest package of austerity measures since the 1930s, such a limited action is a calculated betrayal by the trade unions—both of their own members and of every worker and youth.

The government is unilaterally tearing up the pension rights of 5.5 million public sector workers, who will be forced to pay higher contributions over a longer period in return for a lower pay-out. This is a blatant robbery which, like the spending cuts as a whole, follows the biggest heist of all—the theft of billions from taxpayers to bail out Britain's banks and super-rich following the 2008 economic crisis. Moreover, it is intended to legitimise the elimination of decent pension provision to any worker, especially the younger generation.

Yet today's strike will involve just four unions—the National Union of Teachers, Association of Teachers and Lecturers, University and College Union, and the Public and Commercial Services union—with a book membership of just 750,000. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) did everything it could to prevent even this token protest taking place, leading the talks with the government. The three largest unions in the public sector, Unison, Unite and the GMB—with a combined membership of 3.5 million members—have refused to participate.

That this is the first such strike to be held in the last 13 months confirms where the TUC really stands in relation to the government's austerity measures. In fact, the number of days lost through strike action fell to the lowest since World War Two in 2010—the year

the coalition took office.

Since then, 143,000 public sector jobs have been cut. In March the contracts of over 100,000 public sector workers were torn up and replaced by inferior pay and conditions. In addition, the government has been able to impose a two-year pay freeze on nurses, teachers and council workers with the unions' compliance.

The unions cannot be entrusted to wage a struggle against the attack on pension rights any more than they can to oppose the elimination of jobs, the destruction of pay and conditions or the dismantling of social services. They plead for talks with the government even while the coalition insists its position is non-negotiable.

In April the government downgraded the value of public sector pensions at the stroke of an administrative pen by indexing them to a lower level calculation of the rate of inflation. The unions did not raise a finger in opposition. Now the government is threatening to tighten up the anti-union laws in the face of today's strikes. But that will not spur the unions into action any more than did the passing of the original anti-union laws in 1983, or their retention by the previous Labour government. On the contrary, they will use such threats to argue that no opposition is possible.

The truth is that the unions are just as anxious as the government to make sure the austerity measures demanded by the major financial institutions are implemented. There are no essential differences between the trade union leaders and their counterparts in government and corporate management. They come from the same highly-paid, upper stratum of the population who are determined to protect their privileges at the expense of the broad mass beneath them.

The same applies to the Labour Party. Throughout its 13 years in office, Labour faithfully implemented the policies required by the City of London. It is directly responsible for fuelling the criminal and reckless speculation that ended in economic catastrophe, and for the bank bailout for which workers are now paying with their livelihoods.

Not only was Labour the first to draw up austerity measures, but it is now playing the key role in helping push through the coalition's own programme of cuts. The attack on public sector pensions is based upon recommendations from Lord Hutton, the former Work and Pensions Minister in the Labour government. Labour MP Frank Field is leading the attack on welfare benefits on behalf of the coalition, while former Health Secretary Alan Milburn now demands the government go further and faster in its efforts to privatise the National Health Service.

No wonder that Labour Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls has attacked the strikes as “falling into a government trap,” while insisting that public sector pensions must be overhauled.

This record is not changed one iota by the fact that a handful of unions have decided to call a 24-hour protest. None of those involved have a credible record in opposing the attacks on pension rights. Indeed, their justification for calling any action is that the coalition plans are unnecessary because they do not recognise the role the unions have already played in undermining the pension rights of public sector workers: Specifically, their agreement with Labour in 2007 to cap employer contributions, raise employee contributions and hike up the retirement age for new entrants to 65.

The UCU has already acceded to the government's demands in relation to the Universities Superannuation Scheme, which covers staff in pre-1992 universities. It has made counter-proposals which agree to the scrapping of the final salary scheme as well as the downgrading of pensions to the CPI measure of inflation. The UCU action will only involve staff covered by the Teachers Pension Scheme, and takes place on a day when colleges and universities are closed!

For its part, the supposedly “left” PCS has already offered the prospect of a climb-down in the event of “significant concessions by the government”.

As for the largest public sector union, Unison, no

action is taking place at all. General Secretary Dave Prentis—who makes demagogic speeches threatening a “hot autumn”—has refused to ballot his members for strike action so this does not cut across talks with the government. There can be no doubt some filthy, divisive deal is being stitched up behind closed doors to the detriment of working people.

The bitter reality is that workers in Britain face exactly the same situation as those in Spain, Greece, Portugal and Ireland whose living standards are being decimated. It is not, as is routinely claimed, that workers should accept sacrifices in the short term to bring about a “recovery”. Rather, the economic crisis is being used to carry out an even greater transfer of wealth from working people to the super-rich and to restructure social relations based on ever greater levels of exploitation.

Working people confront a fundamental crisis of the capitalist profit system. Just as in the 1930s, this threatens mass unemployment, poverty and war. Neither the trade unions, nor Labour can be made to act in workers' interests. On the contrary, here, as in Europe, they play the lead role on behalf of the financial oligarchy in sabotaging and suppressing the class struggle.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, in every workplace and community. These popular bodies must be at the centre of a mass movement to bring down the coalition and replace it with a workers' government committed to socialist policies.

Only the reorganisation of economic life to meet social needs, not private profit, can put an end to militarism and war and guarantee secure jobs, decent living standards, education, health care and a future for young and old alike.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact