

Members of 20 UK unions vote to join strike over pensions

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Members of more than 20 trade unions have now voted in favour of striking on November 30, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Day of Action over the government's attack on public sector pensions.

Some two million people are expected to be involved in the one-day stoppage, including National Health workers, teachers, civil servants, council workers and many other employees in local authorities throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This clean sweep for strike action shows that millions want a fight against the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition's attempts to claw back the £1 trillion bail-out of the banking system from workers' living standards.

However, the TUC's limiting of the strike action to a one-day stoppage over public sector pensions is aimed precisely at preventing a broader mobilisation against the government and the devastating effects of its £100 billion austerity programme.

The one-day national strike will be the first since the coalition government was installed in May 2010. The previous one-day stoppage over public sector pensions in June was confined to three teaching unions and the Public and Commercial Services union covering civil servants.

The government and the media claim public sector workers have "gold plated pensions" that are unaffordable and must be brought into line with the private sector. They cite the fact that just a third of private sector workers are in workplace pensions—down from more than a half a decade ago—compared to 85 percent of public sector workers.

In reality "gold plated" pensions are the province of a select few. One quarter of annual tax relief on pensions—£10 billion—goes to the richest one percent. Most public sector pensions amount to little more than a pittance.

But even though the day of action has been called by the TUC under the slogan "Pension Justice", no effort is being made by the unions to counterpose the demand for decent pensions for all to this divide-and-rule policy. Instead the TUC has ruled out in

advance any joint action by workers in the public and private sector.

The past year and a half has witnessed an unprecedented assault on jobs, wages and social services. Youth unemployment has hit one million, as official unemployment rose by 129,000 in the three months to September to 2.62 million. In the space of just a year some 240,000 jobs have been destroyed in the public sector. Two-thirds of the workforce has experienced a pay freeze and employers in the private and public sector are tearing up terms and conditions and issuing dismissal notices to enforce pay cuts.

The fact that all other issues facing working people are excluded from the November 30 action—job losses, wage cuts—led to sharply contrasting mandates for strike action in the ballots.

The turnout in all the general unions compared unfavorably with those in the smaller unions and associations not traditionally associated with strike action. Unions such as Propect (senior civil service) and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists returned yes votes of around 80 percent on turn-outs in excess of 50 percent. Turnout in the GMB and Unite ballots was much lower, at only a third of the membership, while for the main public service union, Unison, it was just 29 percent.

Workers have not forgotten that these unions have blocked any defiance of the cuts, delivering everything demanded from them by Tory, Liberal and Labour councils up and down the country, including a two-year pay freeze throughout the public sector.

Combined with the escalating cost of living and the previous overhaul of pensions carried out by the Labour government, membership of public sector pension schemes is becoming a thing of the past for low-paid workers.

Following a one-day strike by one million workers in 2006, the unions signed a two-tier pension agreement with Labour with inferior entitlements for new employees and an increased retirement age of 65, compared to 60 for existing members. According to the GMB, there has been a seven percent decline in membership of the Local Government Pension Scheme over the past five years. In 46 of the 118 councils in England one in four workers has dropped out.

The TUC has been in talks with the government for the past year without gaining a single concession.

- The value of public pensions will be downgraded by 15 percent by pegging them to a lower estimate of the rate of inflation. This will affect 12 million people—one in five of the population—including those already retired and their dependants.

- Employee contributions will rise by 3.2 percent, averaging £63.

- Final salary pension schemes will be replaced by inferior career average schemes.

- The pensionable age will rise from 65 to 66 in 2010 and 68 by 2046.

The TUC is again playing a divisive role, advocating that unions negotiate separately on individual schemes while the main planks of the attacks remain intact. It is portraying every ploy by the government to drive a wedge between public sector workers as a proposal worthy of consideration.

In October, the Fire Brigade Union (FBU) withdrew its ballot to participate in the November 30 strike on the grounds that it was exempted from the cost ceiling—the cap on government contributions already set for all other public sector pension schemes.

Announcing its decision, the FBU described the “discussions on pensions” as having “moved in to a new phase, involving detailed discussions within each scheme. The FBU did not support this move at the time since key principles (retirement age, contribution increases etc) had not been resolved through central talks between the Government and the TUC. However, once scheme-specific talks had begun it became our job to ensure the best possible outcome for FBU members.”

The FBU, led by self-proclaimed “left” Matt Wrack, has been forced to post a FAQ page on its website in response to criticism from its members. Question 2 reads, “I am really angry with this decision. Why is the FBU not prepared to take industrial action to protect my pension?”

The union’s reply described the government’s approach as “genuine and meaningful.”

Even at the eleventh hour, the TUC wants nothing more than a face-saving proposal so it can call off the November 30 action. The problem is that the coalition is offering nothing that could be sold to an angry membership as a “victory.”

On November 2, Treasury Minister Danny Alexander outlined a set of revised proposals intended to undermine collective opposition. This centred on a proposal that one million public sector workers due to retire in the 10 years from 1 April 2012 would not work any longer than their existing retirement age and keep their final salary schemes. Additionally, it claimed that those

paid less than £15,000 would not be subject to the contribution increase.

However, both those set to retire over the next 10 years and the low-paid would still need to either pay an increased contribution or work longer for a pension that is worth less due to its indexation to the lower rate of inflation, CPI, instead of RPI.

The TUC claimed that Alexander’s pathetic offer was a welcome development, stating, “All the unions have indicated throughout this process their determination to reach a negotiated settlement on all these issues. That remains the position and unions will engage intensively in the coming weeks.”

The “left” leader of Unison, Dave Prentis, welcomed Alexander’s statement as “a marked improvement on earlier proposals.” He added, “But it is important to understand that the statement has to be translated into offers in the scheme specific talks. We still have had no offer in those negotiations, where such an offer can be legitimately made.”

That the TUC is working to head off a confrontation with the government and its austerity programme accounts for its decision not to hold a central rally in London and to limit workers to regional protests and demonstrations. The only other TUC sanctioned protest—the national demonstration organised back in March—brought half-a-million people onto the streets of London, such is the level of pent-up social anger.

In a statement that reads as a self indictment, the general secretary of Unite, Len McCluskey, commented, “Yet again public sector workers are telling the government ‘enough is enough’. They have endured wage cuts, rising living costs and horrific job losses, as this government forces the less well off in this country to pay for the sins of the elite. They are not prepared to stomach this attack on their pensions, too.”

The trade unions have presided over this unprecedented growth in social inequality by suppressing strike action to an all-time low. They will seek to strangle any genuine fight over public sector pensions or the broader offensive against the working class of which it is part.



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