

# Britain: Anger over pensions feeds into widespread opposition to government and the bankers

## Interviews with UK public sector strikers

**Our reporters**  
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The Socialist Equality Party intervened at rallies and demonstrations across the UK during the public sector one-day strike against the attacks on pensions Wednesday, distributing its statement calling for a general strike to bring down the government.

In London, a young teacher in a group from Villiers High School, Ealing, said, “The strike is completely justified. Look at what the bankers have done and they are making us pay. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

“We will probably have to strike again, and next time we need to picket schools to make people realise. Young teachers are opting out because they have to pay mortgages, and they can’t afford to pay for the pension.

“Our school is a foundation school. The academies are taking ownership of the crisis away from the government. Schools are foolish enough to think that because they are getting a bit of money now, it is going to protect them. Schools are becoming businesses. When I worked for an academy, there was a clause in the contract which said you couldn’t strike.”

Johnathon Switzman from Villiers [pictured] added, “In Ealing today, most schools are on strike, except the two academies. I’m not really affected because I am near the age of retirement. I am here for the young teachers.

“I have friends in the private sector who have already had their pensions plundered. It is about who is paying for the consequences of the crisis. We have to demonstrate to the government that we are not a soft target.”

In Scotland, more than 300,000 public sector workers took to the streets. In Glasgow, workers had to be turned away en masse from a rally because the venue was too small.

Nicola Locke from Garscadden Academy said, “We think that is absolutely vital that we are here today, to stand up for everybody working in the public sector. They do essential services and know they are not going to have a massive salary, so instead it’s important they have good conditions and a decent pension. Now, we are going to be nearly 70 before we get a pension, and the pensions aren’t going to be what we were promised.

“They say we’re all in this together. No way are we all in this together. We have 1 or 2 percent of the population who own the vast majority of the wealth in this country, and the rest of the people have to work very hard for a modest living.”

Ross McSharry, a retired photographer, said, “We should get rid of the stock market and the guys who borrow money. When they lose money, the money is lost forever. It’s them that are bringing us down, not the

working man.”

In Manchester, primary school teacher Fern said, “I have come down to protest today because based on what I am currently earning, 25 years after my retirement date, I will lose £152,000. I’m not prepared to do that when the government don’t even consider a pension reform for themselves and when big business are allowed to get away with not paying their taxes. So why should we pay for the economic mess that the government and banks have got us into?

“Everyone at my school is supporting us, including the parents. The school is shut today.... A lot of people are supporting this. On the way here, I have seen nothing but people cheering and clapping us.

“It’s a lot broader than just the pension’s dispute. I was here marching against the Conservative Party conference in October, and there was the same feeling. There was a huge contingent who came here from the university, staff who are facing cuts. There were students here who are facing massive increase in tuition fees and being saddled with debt. There are a lot of people who are angry, without a doubt”.

At a picket line of ambulance workers on Plymouth Grove in south Manchester, one worker explained, “As ambulance staff, we ordinarily retire at about 55, due to the nature of the job. With this new set-up, we would be going to patients, when we are older than some of the patients. We will end up with more ailments than those we are helping. Ambulance workers notoriously don’t have a long life span anyway, because of all the shifts we do.”

Joe Regan, a probation and victim liaison officer, picketing a probation office in Moss Side, said, “The cuts in pensions are not fair because I’ve had a career in the public sector of 22.5 years working for less pay than I would’ve got in the private sector. I always believed that that would be offset by a decent pension. If I would’ve joined a private scheme, the fund managers would’ve become millionaires. That’s another reason why I joined the public pension, as I’m against this.

“Personally, I’ve already got my pension, which is about £6,000 a year, hardly generous. I’m striking today to support my younger colleagues who won’t get what I’ve got now.”

Strike action affected all of Liverpool’s public sector, with education most hit. Liverpool City Council admitted that 165 of the city’s 170 schools were closed, as were all their day youth and child centres.

Ann, a member of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy striking for the first time in her life, said, “The changes won’t affect my pension, as I retire this year, but it will affect my colleagues, and I am here to support them.

“There are cuts in many areas of the National Health Service, and they

are asking us to do more all the time. It has now become a question of making money and profit, whereas the patient should come first.”

Leeds, West Yorkshire, saw its biggest demonstration for generations. Donald, a lecturer at Lincoln University, said, “This is a time when parents believe their children will have a worse life than they did. My son is 17 and is going to university soon. I think of the opportunities I had to go to university in the 1970s. We thought that life was rubbish then, but it doesn’t compare with now.

“Things have happened in the last 30 years that we wouldn’t have believed possible. Everything has got much, much worse.

“I didn’t vote for Labour in 1997 because I could see that he was just ‘more of the same’. Since then, there have been cuts on wages and conditions and attacks on civil rights that Maggie Thatcher could only dream about.

“I have become more and more aware that this country is run solely in the interests of the rich. The gap between rich and poor is getting wider all the time.

“I am a part-time lecturer, which used to be regarded as a really good job. But I am in debt up to my eyeballs. We are squeezed more and more all the time. And for what? For the benefit of the top 1 percent.

“We need a completely new kind of politics, a completely new economic system and a new way of running the country. The conventional political parties are completely redundant.”

Tammy Cashin, a social work student at Leeds University, explained, “I am hoping today will be a galvanising experience for people who are struggling against the cuts. With the Occupy movement, we are seeing change of political narrative. I am hoping the struggle will spread to wider areas, to the unemployed, to those not in unions, to asylum seekers.”

In Sheffield, one picketer at the Hallamshire Hospital said, “This is not just about pensions but cuts and privatisation. This hospital will become fully privatised.

“It was Labour who started privatisation, and the Tories are continuing it. They are as bad as each other. They only speak for the businesses. We need a big change in this country.”

Phillip Toulson, a porter at the Children’s Hospital, said, “I agree with your leaflet. We need a general strike. This government won’t respond to us. We should have a government that represents the workers, something in between capitalism and communism.

“I came out today because I don’t want to work longer, paying more than double for my pension for less pay at the end of it. This is not just about us, but the future generations. We have to take a stand for them.

“Our workload has trebled over the past few years. They are always looking to see who they can get rid of to save a few pounds. Managers are getting rid of lower-paid workers to defend their own pay and conditions.”

In Doncaster, South Yorkshire, community nurse Craig Beaumont said, “I wholeheartedly agree with the day of action, but I like what you say that we need a general strike to bring down this government.

“They are trying to divide and pitch public against private sector workers, which is a Tory strategy. They are getting us to pay for the bankers’ mistakes.

“As a nurse, I work with adults with learning difficulties. Qualified staff in this area has been decimated. When I started, this job there used to be 12 qualified nurses. Now there’s 1 between five nursing homes. It’s dangerous.”

Kerry, who also works in community health, said, “I think this involves not just the workers on strike, but everyone in the country. They are privatising services at a rapid pace. They are cutting the 8 a.m.-8 p.m. doctors in Doncaster. The pharmacy at Doncaster Royal Infirmary has been privatised, and the laundry service. Workers leaving are not being replaced. All of the secondary schools will be privately run academies

soon, and all services are going to suffer working with fewer staff.

“All we ever hear now is, ‘You are a business and we have a budget.’ They don’t talk about patients any more.”

On the picket line at Poole council waste recycling plant [pictured], Jeff Hobbs explained, “We have to fight for our pensions and against the government, which is determined to destroy public services. We should also fight for the workers in private industry. Their pensions should be brought up to the same as those in the public sector.

“It’s time people stood up to this government and said enough is enough. Many of us are on the minimum wage. We’ve had cuts to jobs, pay and holidays. I’m using my pension to save for my old age. But if we lose this strike, I will have to use the money to make ends meet.

“I’ve worked here for nine years. During that time, all our conditions have changed. People are brought in on lower wages. There’s a constant threat that we’ll be privatised.

“We shouldn’t be made to pay for the bankers and financial elite. They created the problem, yet they will be getting million-pound bonuses when people struggle to put food on the table. People can’t run a car, and they have to cycle to work. We’re getting to the point where people are having to choose between heating the house and eating food.

“I don’t see how we can find the money to go to war all the time and can’t find enough for the poor, elderly or vulnerable children. I’m involved personally. My daughter’s boyfriend, who’s in the army, got blown up in Afghanistan. His treatment afterwards was shocking. Now there is the threat of war in Iran.”

Neil Walsh added, “Every year, it’s getting more and more difficult because of the cuts. Bills are going up, but our wages aren’t keeping up with inflation.

“The government shouldn’t take it out on workers. There are people with a lot more money, the top management and bankers with big bonuses. They are sitting pretty while we are suffering. We are the ones doing front-line jobs, the real jobs people value. Yet we have had a three-year pay freeze, and they are talking about just 1 percent rise next year. This country is split into two halves—those at the top with all the money and the rest of us who are always asked to pay more and more into the Treasury.”

In Bristol, John, a teacher, said, “The pension changes will reduce my pay by about £100 a month, and I will be teaching a classroom of 13- to 15-year-olds when I’m 68. It will affect me now and in 20 years’ time.

“I have been a tutor for 20 years, and I have never been on strike before. It is the first time I have been angry enough at what this stupid government are doing to get off my backside and do something about it.

“I think there are a lot of people like me. I’m normally very moderate and very quiet, but like a lot of people I’m very cross at the unfairness of it as much as anything else. We don’t see MPs’ pensions reduced massively or bankers’ pensions.”

Another teacher, Frances, explained, “It is very unfair what the government are doing, how they are behaving, ripping off the working class in order to feed the profits of a small minority of people.

“I have to look after my mother, too, who is running out of every bit of money she has; I’m totally reliant on any state benefits I can get, and I have several jobs, I work really hard and I still have a mortgage to pay off. A general strike would be a good idea, and we should have workers’ representatives on the pay boards of big companies and at the G8.”



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