

Over two million UK public sector workers strike

Julie Hyland
1 December 2011

Over two million public sector workers took part yesterday in a 24-hour strike against the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government's attack on their pensions.

The largest national walkout for more than 30 years involved members of 37 unions in an action backed by the Trades Union Congress (TUC). They included teachers, health workers, civil servants and workers in local authorities and other areas of social provision, angered at the coalition's plans to make public service employees pay more and work longer for lower pensions on retirement.

The government and the media attempted to downplay the strike, with Prime Minister David Cameron describing it as a "damp squib" even while he complained of extensive disruption.

The figures prove otherwise. Just 13 percent of schools in England were unaffected by the walkout, with a similar figure in Wales and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, less than two percent of schools remained open.

Tens of thousands of health workers struck, with 60,000 non-urgent operations and appointments postponed in England alone. Massive turnouts were also reported at police and ambulance emergency call centres, with the South East Coast Ambulance Service and London Ambulance Service stating they could deal only with "life-threatening" cases.

While the media claimed minimum disruption at airports despite the action by immigration staff, *Sky News* reported that Cameron's press secretary was among a small number of "volunteers" at Heathrow helping out on border control.

In Northern Ireland, no bus or train services were running. In England, most transport unions were not involved in the strike but, where they were, services were suspended. The Mersey tunnels in Liverpool were closed, as was the metro system in Newcastle and the Shetland ferries.

Tens of thousands of workers participated in around 1,000 demonstrations and rallies across the country. Despite the largely hostile media coverage, reporters on the scene described

huge public support.

London's public sector workers "turned out en masse" for the march in the capital, one *Guardian* journalist reported, while another in Birmingham said it was "not easy" to "find anyone who will express anything other than support" for the strike.

In Glasgow, Swansea, Liverpool and many other cities, shoppers spontaneously applauded the demonstrations, as opinion polls for the BBC, the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* reported public backing for the strike of between 60 and 90 percent.

In London, a group of 200 protestors tried to occupy the headquarters of the mining corporation, Xstrata, and were kettled by a heavy police presence. A statement by Occupy London said the attempt was aimed at highlighting the pay of Xstrata's Mike Davies, the highest compensated CEO in the FTSE 100 last year.

Earlier in the week, it was reported that take-home pay had fallen for 11 consecutive months for most workers, while the earnings of chief executives and directors of the major corporations have risen by 15 percent in the last year.

Elsewhere in the capital, in Hackney there were reports that police clashed with strikers, and 30 people had been detained. According to some reports, more than 100 police were involved in the confrontation, which seems to have begun over the use of a sound system on a picket line.

For the government, Cabinet Office Minister Francis Maude attacked the walkout as "inappropriate, untimely and irresponsible, especially while talks are ongoing."

The tenor of such talks was made plain the day before the strike by Chancellor George Osborne in his annual Autumn Statement to parliament on the budget.

Osborne admitted that the government's aim of using massive austerity measures, including wage freezes in the public sector, to pay off the UK's structural deficit by 2015 had failed. Rising unemployment and falling tax receipts meant that the debt had instead grown by almost £30 billion.

The government's response was to pledge greater austerity for an even longer period of time.

Osborne stressed that the priority was to defend Britain's creditworthiness—shorthand for the parasitic interests of the City of London. The country “had to live within its means,” he said.

This demand was leveled only at the working class.

Public spending cuts are to be extended for two years beyond the original deadline of 2015, Osborne announced.

The public sector wage freeze, now in place for two years, was due to finish in late 2012. But the Chancellor said the government would impose a one percent ceiling on any pay rises for two years after this date. Combined with the hiking of pension contributions, it mounts to an effective 16 percent pay cut over five years for the public sector.

Osborne also announced that a public sector pay review would look at ending national pay rates to make them “more responsive to local labour markets”. This attempt to break up national pay agreements is to be effective by 2015.

In addition, the planned increase in the age of retirement from 66 to 67 is to be brought forward by eight years to 2028.

Separately, the Office for Budget Responsibility said that more than 700,000 jobs will be lost in the public sector due to spending cuts, which alone will bring official unemployment to over three and a quarter million.

The Autumn Statement targeted the lowest-paid workers, as Osborne said that a planned increase in child tax credits (paid to low-income families) will be scrapped.

The *Guardian* commented, “Osborne's shock raid on public sector pay makes it hard to believe that he—or anyone else in government—was serious when asking public sector workers to think again about going on strike.”

In fact, the deliberately provocative announcement was a statement of intent to the international finance markets that the coalition is determined to impose their diktats, regardless of public opposition. Fully 80 percent of the government's deficit-reduction strategy comes from public spending cuts, and just 20 percent from tax rises.

Osborne has authorised a further £75 billion in “quantitative easing” by the Bank of England—public money that will be pumped directly into the coffers of the banks.

Among other measures unveiled was a freeze on the capital gains tax threshold and plans to limit the right of those employed at smaller companies to claim unfair dismissal, so as to make it easier for them to be made redundant.

Writing in the *Daily Mail*, Max Hastings welcomed the moves. “We have created a social model for ourselves that is no longer affordable, when workers on the far side of the world produce goods for a fraction of the Western price,” he said.

“The Age of Abundance” is over, he continued. “Above all, we must make our industry and commerce leaner, tougher, more efficient, less hamstrung by regulation and employment law.”

The social devastation being visited across Europe—in Greece, Italy and elsewhere—at the behest of the financial oligarchy has

shown there is no limit to the rapacious demands of the ruling elite.

Against this, the Day of Action showed a determined mood amongst working people. But the TUC has no intention of leading a struggle in defence of workers' jobs, conditions and democratic rights. For 18 months, the trade unions have acquiesced in pay cuts, wage freezes and mass layoffs.

Finally, they were forced to stage a show of opposition. But the solid turnout will unnerve the trade union bureaucracy more than the government—especially when any mention of the uprisings in Tahrir Square, Egypt drew roars of approval at the London rally.

The unions continue to plead for “meaningful negotiations” over pensions and no further action is planned, with UNISON General Secretary Dave Prentis referring only vaguely to potential strikes “in 2012”. Behind the scenes, each of the unions is looking to cut its own deal with the government.

The trade unions seek to divert popular anger behind the Labour Party. This is the same right-wing party that enabled the feeding frenzy by the super-rich throughout its years in office and initiated public sector pay freezes and the undermining of pension rights.

Regarding the assault on workers' jobs and living standards, there are no differences between Labour and the government. In parliament, Labour leader Ed Miliband pointedly refused to back the strike, while Cameron boasted that his government's pension reforms had been drawn up and endorsed by John Hutton, Labour's former work and pensions secretary.

Campaign teams from the Socialist Equality Party intervened at rallies up and down the country, circulating the statement, “For a general strike to bring down the Cameron government!”

This demand was well-received. As the SEP explained, “The TUC and the trade unions long ago ceased to be genuine organisations of the working class and are directly responsible for the terrible situation now facing working people.

“What is needed is to mobilise the collective strength of the working class in a general strike. New rank-and-file organisations must be built—independent of the trade union and labour bureaucracy—to unite all sections of the working class in a common fight to bring down the government... It is not a question of exchanging one set of capitalist politicians with another, but of replacing the system in its entirety through the formation of a workers' government.”



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact