

UK: TUC moves to sell out fight against public sector pension cuts

Tony Robson
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The Trades Union Congress (TUC) is moving to divide and sell out the struggle against the government's attack on public sector pensions, which saw some two million workers strike on November 30.

The TUC Public Sector Liaison Group (PSLG)—consisting of the leaders of 24 unions—agreed on Monday to separate deals over the four main pension schemes within the public sector. Based upon only marginal changes to the government's original plans, Unison, Unite and the GMB have agreed a provisional framework for a settlement on the local government pension scheme while Unison has accepted the final offer on the health service pension scheme as the basis for a negotiated agreement.

This has left teachers and civil service workers isolated, with the government imposing frameworks that include increases in employee contributions from next year.

The dispute began with government plans to make public sector workers work longer and pay higher contributions for a lower pension on retirement. This assault is fundamental to the Conservative-Liberal Democrats austerity measures and is intended as a green light for the overturning of workers' rights across the board.

In November, the government made some paltry revisions to its proposals, and threatened that unless the unions accepted these, it would simply impose its original plan. Behind the threats, however, the government intended the "revisions" as a means of enabling the TUC to end the dispute, by claiming concessions had been made.

The government had set December 20 as the deadline for agreement, and the TUC duly obliged. In parliament, Treasury minister Danny Alexander said the unions had agreed to suspend any further industrial action. "These agreements deliver the government's key objectives in full, and do so with no new money since our November offer," he said.

Alexander stated that most workers will have to work longer and pay more and pointed to the fact that the downgrading of pensions was also motivated by government plans to extend privatization. The agreement would make it

more affordable for the private sector to bid for public sector contracts, he indicated.

TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber, taking advantage of the fact that much of the detail is yet to be published, claimed "There is a strong sense of real progress which provides the basis for further negotiations in the New Year." In truth, the unions have capitulated to the government's central demands. The so-called concessions leave unscathed the main planks of the governments' plans—downgrading public sector pensions to the lower level of inflation, increased employees contributions, raising the retirement age to the state retirement age and the replacement of final salary schemes with inferior career average schemes.

The repackaged agreements are aimed at driving a wedge between public workers along sectional lines. In relation to the health service pension scheme, Unison is recommending a negotiated settlement on the pretext that low-paid workers will be exempted from a contributions increase. But this is limited to the next financial year alone with further negotiations to follow. Even then it is based upon the proviso that those earning more than £26,557 will have to make up the shortfall. Health workers are to be transferred from a final salary to a career average scheme in another cost cutting exercise on the basis that those less than 10 years away from retirement retain their existing entitlements.

The union's health secretary, Christine McAnea, was unequivocal that there is no alternative to the proposed settlement. "We have been able to protect some categories of member", she said, "but as far as we are concerned this was always a damage limitation exercise."

GMB National Officer Rahana Azam had previously dismissed the "concessions" as simply moving the furniture. Unite assistant General Secretary Gail Cartmail had described them as "tawdry 'divide and rule' tactics designed to set one set of dedicated hard-working NHS workers against another."

Now, Unite has lined up with Unison and the GMB in a bid to negotiate a separate deal with the government which is no less reprehensible. Once again all that has been offered

is that employee contributions will be *delayed* for two years. According to the BBC the unions have already exchanged for this an increase of the local government retirement age to the state retirement age and a shift to a career average scheme. The logic of accepting the government's "parameters" is that any minor adjustments will be paid for by further concessions from the unions at the expense of workers.

In their haste to sell a shabby deal to its membership Unison, Unite and the GMB have left teachers and civil servants isolated and at the mercy of the coalition government. The supposed left leader of Unison, Dave Prentis, has been the most vocal advocate of "scheme specific" negotiations and is peddling the sectional deals in health and local government.

Even before the negotiations were due to be formally concluded, it was announced that the increase in employee contributions for teachers and civil servants will begin in April 2012. In a letter to the civil service unions, the Cabinet Office stated that the government's measures are to be implemented in full, regardless of any agreement being in place. This sweeping attack drew only the most muted criticism from the unions concerned.

Mark Serwotka, the pseudo-left leader of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS), commented, "We remain committed to the negotiations and will continue to attend meetings, but ministers only appear to be interested in imposing an unfair and entirely unnecessary tax on people working in the public sector."

Nonetheless, the PCS has been excluded from any further talks. While Serwotka has been built up in the media as a dissenting voice, he has deliberately refrained from any criticism of the TUC and its divide-and-rule policy. While saying the PCS was not "ruling out" further industrial action, he said "it would be irresponsible of us to announce now that there will be strikes when we have not fully assessed where we are."

This sabotage of the fight to defend public sector pensions was prepared at the outset by the trade unions themselves. The November 30 Day of Action was a token gesture to dissipate the rising social anger the unions have worked to suppress. The scale of the limited action taken, however, clearly alarmed the trade union bureaucracy as it threatened to feed into wider discontent over the government's austerity programme and rising social inequality. Such a development threatened the relations the trade unions have established with the corporate and financial elite after decades of isolating and betraying every strike and their transformation into nothing more than extended arms of management in implementing job losses, pay cuts and speed-ups.

That is why the TUC have worked to head off a confrontation with the coalition government and to do its bidding. From the outset the TUC ring-fenced the pension dispute from the government's spending cuts. It feigned a show of unity while pursuing a completely divisive approach within the negotiations. After nearly a year of meaningless talks it entered into individual negotiations on government terms.

The pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP) heralded the pensions campaign as proof of a revival of the trade unions as organisations of class struggle. Only now do they offer belated criticism of Barber and leaders such as Dave Prentis whose credentials they have worked to bolster. This is solely so as to try and maintain the stranglehold of the bureaucracy, by claiming that petitions and lobbies can force it to alter course.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only political tendency that warned the working class that the fight against the attacks on public sector pensions could not be conducted through the confines of the trade unions. We explained that the TUC campaign was designed to preempt a genuine mobilisation of the working class and to dissipate opposition on the basis of minimal action.

The working class is posed directly with the need to take the fight into its own hands and develop genuine rank and file organisations as part of a mass movement to bring down the coalition government, and for a workers' government based on socialist policies. The precondition for such a development is a thoroughgoing break from the trade unions, which have once again demonstrated that they are the chief obstacle to the defence of workers' jobs, living conditions and social rights.



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