

# British trade unions call off national strike over public sector pensions

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Four public sector unions have called off the joint national strike that was planned for today.

Over half a million civil service workers, teachers and lecturers across Britain would have participated in the strike against the government's attack on public sector pensions. The strike will instead be restricted to London, with only National Union of Teachers (NUT) and University and College Union (UCU) members (and only those in post-1992 universities) taking part. The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union opted out altogether. The Educational Institute of Scotland has entered into separate negotiations with the Scottish government.

Union executives vetoed national strike action despite consultation ballots returning sizeable pro-strike votes. The PCS recorded its highest ever margin for strike action of 71.2 percent, the NUT 73 percent, EIS 72 percent and UCU 60 percent.

The NUT was first to announce that the strike would only take place in London. This was the cue for the rest to sound their own retreat, with each blaming the other for leaving them with no choice. The UCU said that its support for national strike action was conditional on the PCS, which in turn justified its withdrawal on the basis of the downgrading of the strike action by the NUT!

All this proves is the truth of the adage that there is no honour among thieves.

The rout of the public sector pension dispute destroys whatever remains of the claim made by the Socialist Party (SP), Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and their ilk that the four unions that had not already betrayed their members constituted a "rejectionist" camp. With the two major unions, Unison and Unite, having all but abandoned any pretense of opposing the government's attacks as they negotiate their way towards a sell-out, the SP and SWP used the proposed one-day protest

strike as proof that there was still some fight left in the trade unions. This, they said, could be used as a base from which to pressure the other union leaders to get back on board.

The concern of the four unions, in which the ex-left groups have a major influence, was how they could accept the rotten deal on offer in the face of substantial opposition from their members without losing all credibility along with the other unions. The only thing they rejected was the necessary political fight against the betrayals of the working class by their fellow bureaucrats.

Having hailed the "rejectionist" unions as a principled alternative, the SP and SWP have responded to their sell-out as if they are innocent bystanders.

The SP's comment on the debacle is run under the cynical headline, "Prepare for future struggle".

Prepared, as always, to legitimise every betrayal, it describes the London-strike by the UCU and NUT as "a platform" for activists to fight for national action.

It explains the "complicated and frustrating position" confronting the PCS NEC only as being "organised more on a group basis" and so making "London-only action more difficult." Calling off national action is portrayed as necessary given the "serious blow" of the absence of the NUT.

The SP is defending its own actions, not simply those of the PCS and its leader, General Secretary Mark Serwotka.

The SP has a majority on the PCS executive and it was they who called off the strike. It also describes the NUT's position as a mere "mistake" because they want no bridges burned that might hinder the advance of their careers in the education unions upper echelons. The SP's statement that a "fighting strategy" makes it

“essential that decisions on the struggle are not left in the hands of... national trade union leaders” is merely the height of cynicism.

While the SWP members on the PCS Executive voted for the strike to proceed, the group continues to endorse those responsible for betraying it.

The SP and SWP promoted Serwotka on their platforms as an example of the ideal left union leader, one who would initiate further strike action following the capitulation of the TUC. In reality he only finally came around to setting a date to strike at all after it was subject to a consultation ballot whose result he has now chosen to reject. He has justified calling off the strike on the pretext that the mandate should be interpreted by the government as the basis for serious negotiations.

The SWP writes, “PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka has played a magnificent role throughout the dispute... However, we believe he was wrong to call on the PCS executive to pull the 28 March following the NUT’s decision...”

The SWP may believe Serwotka to have been wrong, but it still gives credence to the PCS claims that it is approaching other public sector unions for further action in April. It too has downplayed the sabotage of the NUT with polite references to mistakes and missed opportunities. The unmistakable message is that the dead hand of the bureaucracy must remain around the throat of the working class at all costs.

For the pseudo-left groups, the over-riding question is always to reinforce the tattered authority of the trade unions. They have played the central role in demobilising workers in the fight against the attacks on public sector pensions and in preventing a broader mobilisation against the government and its austerity program.

One quote after another could be cited over the past months showing how both groups hailed each token protest staged by TUC and public sector unions as the dawn of a new era of class struggle. But even within this pantheon of lies, the article in the SWP’s *Socialist Review*, entitled “Pressure at the top”, stands out.

Julie Sherry chooses to rail against a position that trade unions leaders will always “mechanically sell out.”

Rather, “with rank and file confidence still low... The drive for the mass strikes of 2011 came from a section of the bureaucracy.”

“The role of socialists has been important in fighting to make the strikes happen,” she continues, “but the strikes were not simply forced by workers from the bottom up. The fact that the left trade union leaders were pushing for action opened up the possibility of mass strikes becoming a reality.”

Standing reality on its head, the initiative for action is attributed to the bureaucracy and the left fakers in its ranks. The working class is reduced to a passive force, whose sole function is to cheer on the SWP and the SP as they politely urge the unions to do whatever it is they are prepared to do. A genuine struggle against the government demands a rebellion against the trade unions and their pseudo left apologists, through the building of new class struggle organisations and a new socialist leadership.



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