

# UK trade unions mount much reduced one-day pension strike

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The strike called by several UK trade unions on Thursday represented a further stage of the demobilisation of workers in the face of an onslaught on pay, conditions and pensions by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition.

Just five months after more than 2 million public sector workers took action on November 30, those participating in Thursday's strike totalled 400,000 according to the unions, while the government put the number at just 150,000.

The action was called supposedly to oppose government plans to restructure public sector pensions, forcing workers to pay higher contributions and work longer, only to receive less on retirement. Under "final salary" schemes that still exist for some in the public sector, pensions are tied to the rate of pay on retirement. The government wants to replace these with "career average" schemes, providing a lower pension; to add insult to injury, there will be increased employee contributions and a longer qualifying period.

The November 30 strike involved action by members of dozens of unions. Thursday's action was called by just six—Unite (1.5 million members), Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS, 301,000), University and College Union (UCU, 119,400), Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT, 79,500), Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA, 45,000), and the Immigration Services Union (39,000).

Unions representing hundreds of thousands of public sector workers—such as Unison (1.4 million members) and the GMB (601,300)—did not take any action Thursday.

The large scale of the resistance to the attacks on pensions, evidenced by the millions who took action on November 30, alarmed and shocked the union bureaucracy, which immediately set about sabotaging

all further opposition.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC), together with the majority of unions, worked to divide public sector workers into separate "scheme-specific" talks, behind which they have effectively signed up to the changes demanded by the employers. Four trade unions that had still not been able to reach agreement with the government then called off a planned national strike set for March 28 this year.

Of the unions involved in Thursday's action, only the PCS and UCU took action nationally. Unite limited action to its members in the health service. NIPSA only called out its members in the civil service, involving around 15,000 in the strike. Its health and social care sector members were called out for just two hours. The RMT called just 250 members out on strike—sailors in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary!

The poor support for marches and rallies reflects the degree to which the unions have been successful in sabotaging any struggle by public sector workers. In the cities of Manchester and Salford, a combined total of 150 people were involved in two separate marches, which culminated in Manchester city centre.

In Liverpool no demonstration or march took place, other than a small group picketing outside the Royal Hospital in the city.

The centrepiece organised by the PCS—a march in London from Westminster Bridge to Methodist Central Hall to hear speeches from assorted trade union bureaucrats, including PCS leader Mark Serwotka—saw only around 500 workers participate.

Such was the paucity of the mobilisation of the unions that most of the media's coverage was instead focused on a march of some 30,000 off-duty police officers in London, in opposition to cuts in the number of police. An unofficial stoppage by the prison officers

union was also offered up to bolster the pretence that the unions were maintaining a struggle.

Bob Crow, the general secretary of the RMT union, claimed during his Central Hall speech that the strike would be the signal for the trade unions to embark on a campaign leading up to a nationwide stoppage in the autumn. Managing to keep a straight face, the man who had managed to call out only 250 of his own union members in support of the PCS/UCU strike, declared, “You know the general strike action in Greece and France? We’re going to bring it to Britain”.

The reality is that no national strike action has been sanctioned by any trade union in the future. For its part the TUC has mooted that it is considering calling a national demonstration at some future, unspecified date.

The various pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party consistently present PCS leader Serwotka as a militant firebrand, who is the now the last line of defence against the onslaught on pension rights. In reality, Serwotka and the PCS (which has a “left” majority on its executive) accepted the ending of final salary pensions for new entrants long ago, and would do the same now for all civil servants if the government made a slightly improved offer.

At Central Hall, Serwotka pleaded with the government to settle the remaining differences it has with his union so as to end the dispute, telling the BBC, “Real leadership from government today is to get around the negotiating table with us to sort it out”.

According to Serwotka, the action on Thursday indicates “that the show is back on the road. The tide is coming back.” Nothing could be further than the truth as far as the union bureaucracy is concerned.

Speaking to the *Guardian*, Serwotka confirmed that further action will be specifically confined to sporadic, local events. The *Guardian* commented that PCS members “at individual government departments, such as the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Transport, will take part in discrete industrial action over the summer”.

In attempting to cover for the role of the union bureaucracy, Serwotka sought to invent a scenario in which it will be years before the government is able to impose attacks on workers’ pension rights. He told the *Guardian*, “There will be three years before a lot of these pension changes are in. They have to go through

parliament. These strikes will be the latest expression that the tide has turned back against the government.”

While the unions are moving to settle the pensions “dispute” on the basis of negotiations, workers face the full brunt of the attacks on their pay, jobs, and pensions. Since April 1, civil servants have to pay higher pension contribution rates.



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