

PCS union suspends strike planned for Olympics

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A planned walkout by thousands of UK civil service workers on the eve of the Olympic Games' opening was suspended at the eleventh hour by the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union.

The 24-hour strike by Home Office staff planned for July 26 included those employed in immigration and border control. It would have caused severe disruption to Britain's major airports on the busiest day of the year and a substantial political embarrassment for the government.

Members of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union had voted in favour of the strike following a ballot of 16,000 Home Office staff. For the past 18 months the government had refused to negotiate over plans to cut the workforce by a third, with the elimination of 8,500 jobs. The walkout was in protest against the job cuts, the extension of a two-year pay freeze by another two years, privatisation and the victimisation of union representatives.

The PCS announced its decision to jettison the one-day stoppage and work-to-rule only one day before it was due to start. It justified its decision by claiming that significant concessions had been obtained from the government.

It did not take long for this claim to unravel. PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka held a press conference at which he announced that an agreement had been reached to recruit 1,100 additional staff—800 workers in the border service, part of the UK Border Agency (UKBA), and 300 in the Passport Service. But this was denied shortly after by Immigration Minister Damian Green, who said he did not recognise the figure of 800 extra jobs in the UKBA and that the jobs at the Passport Service were for unfilled vacancies, not new recruitment.

“It is pretty clear the union leadership need some kind

of fig leaf for their climbdown,” Green stated.

The PCS showed that the 800 jobs had been advertised, but the Home Office attributed this to an administrative error. Only 400 new jobs were in fact available, it said.

The PCS has called for Green to stand down and Serwotka has described the Home Office disclaimer as “a shambolic or deliberate lie.” But if so, then the PCS was a more than willing dupe. It was, as Green said, looking for a fig leaf pretext for calling off the strike.

Serwotka claimed that the supposed agreement on hiring new staff represented “real progress”, even while admitting that no other areas of grievance were addressed.

Even the disputed 1,100 new jobs (that now looks like 400-700 maximum) was a fraction of the total number of jobs to be cut in the UKBA by 2015—5,300 or 22 percent of the workforce.

The job shedding in the Home Office is, moreover, part of a wider restructuring of the civil service in line with the overall government austerity measures that the union has barely made a show of opposing. Some 1,000 jobs are to be axed in the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. In the tax office, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the workforce has been reduced by half since 2005, while another 10,000 jobs are to be axed by 2015. At the Department of Work and Pensions further work is to be outsourced to the private sector, as the firm Capita prepares to take on responsibility for online applications for Job Seekers Allowance.

The PCS is the fifth largest union in the country. Along with Serwotka, the leadership of the union is dominated by ex-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP). Both these groups were quick to endorse the union's action in calling off the strike on a false premise.

Referring to the claim that 1,100 new jobs had been created, the SWP stated, “A planned strike by PCS union members has been called off after management concessions.” It quoted “Left wing Labour MP John McDonnell”, stating, “Thank goodness the government has seen sense. The union has secured a tremendous breakthrough to protect its members’ jobs.”

The SP published a one-paragraph article headlined, “Home Office strike suspended as more than 1,000 new jobs announced”, with a link to the PCS’s own press release.

There is nothing vaguely left wing about groups whose sole function is to justify the politics of class betrayal not class struggle. At all times their sole concern is to maintain the authority and control of the unions, as they continue to snuff out any opposition and collaborate with overturning of past gains.

Calling off strikes is becoming standard procedure for the PCS. In March it called off a national one-day stoppage, alongside the teaching unions, against the attacks on public sector pensions. Instead it participated in a one-day stoppage with only two other unions in May, after the increase in employee contributions had already taken effect.

In the latest dispute, its belated and now abandoned call for strike action was coupled with a political campaign aimed at wrong-footing the government on immigration and national security—issues that serve as a staple for diverting attention away from the cause of the social crisis and justifying the curtailing of democratic rights. “Ministers have committed to check every passenger arriving in the country, and there should be no loopholes”, Serwotka stated.

The PCS timed the strike to coincide with the opening of the Olympics, based upon the assumption that the government would be susceptible to pressure. Instead, the government sought a High Court injunction to outlaw the action. The PCS called off the strike within an hour of the legal hearing being due to start.

Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sports emphasised, “This is the wrong time to pursue a grievance. Even our most militant unions can recognise that this is not the moment.”

He refers to the unions led by other supposed “lefts” such as Len McCluskey and Bob Crow—Unite and the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union—which have worked to remove the threat of strikes in the run-up to

the games.

A deal involving maintenance workers agreed by the RMT on Network Rail in return for productivity-related pay stated that the “smooth running of the Olympic Games is in the national interest and all parties will take every measure possible to avoid industrial action during this period.”

In relation to London Underground, the union’s claim that the bonus scheme would not jeopardise contractual rights and safety standards has already been undermined with unqualified staff being counted as part of the minimum staffing numbers. The RMT has restricted opposition to a work-to-rule only.

McCluskey, the leader of Britain’s largest union, had threatened a campaign of strikes to disrupt the Olympics. Instead, the union wound down industrial unrest by London bus workers after a one day strike on June 22, the first city-wide action since 1982, in return for a £500 lump sum payment.

The author also recommends:

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[16 July 2012]



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