

UK probation officers vote to strike

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5 November 2013

Members of the National Association of Probation Officers (Napo) voted by 84.4 percent at their Annual General Meeting last month to strike against the UK government's plans to privatise the 106-year-old Probation Service.

Following the meeting, Napo's leadership proposed just a 24-hour strike to be held on November 5. The action is not even being held over a full single working day, starting at 12 noon.

Under the "Transforming Rehabilitation" plans announced in January by Chris Grayling, the minister of justice, 70 percent of probation work will be sold off to private companies by October 2014. Twenty-one contracts worth £450 million to supervise 225,000 low- and medium-risk offenders each year are up for grabs, including the running of unpaid work, probation hostels and programmes. A new National Probation Service (NPS) will deal with the rehabilitation of 31,000 high-risk offenders each year. Napo members will be transferred either to the Civil Service (within the proposed National Probation Service) or to one of the proposed 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs).

Staff working for the private companies will receive payment by results and will be forced to sign contracts with significantly lower wages and terms and conditions, or will be TUPE'd (Transfer of Undertakings [Protection of Employment] Regulations 2006) over, which should protect their wages for two years, but this is not guaranteed.

In May, 2,600 employees of the "social enterprise" Turning Point, in Stafford, England, working with people with mental health, substance abuse and employment problems, were told that they must sign new contracts on worse terms by May 17 or face the sack, breaking the TUPE regulations, after being transferred over from the National Health Service.

Neither will jobs be safe. In 2011, unpaid work by

offenders in London (then called Community Payback) was privatised, with Serco winning the contract. No sooner was the ink dry on the trade union recognition agreement than it announced plans to make 99 of the 300 staff redundant.

On announcing the ballot result, Napo general secretary Ian Lawrence stressed the union was doing everything to prevent a strike. "We now have a mandate for industrial action that we shall be pursuing with vigor but as always Napo will be seeking to avoid this if possible by way of further negotiations with Ministers."

In a last-minute blog posting on November 4, Lawrence wrote that the strike was only going ahead following the union "pleading with" government ministers "to retain what currently works within Probation, and at least trial their scheme in a structured and measurable way".

Napo has only held four strikes in its entire history.

The Unison public sector union is not involved in the strike even though it represents a majority of workers in the probation service. The union is waiting until the end of a phony "consultation period" with the government. It has done nothing despite a survey of Unison probation members in July showing that 99 percent were opposed to the government's privatisation plans, with 85 percent prepared to take industrial action to defend their jobs, pay and conditions if these were not guaranteed to be protected.

In a briefing to members Lawrence and Napo national chair Tim Rendon made no criticism of Unison, stating instead that it would be "*a matter of conscience for individual Unison members if they decide to not cross picket lines* that are outside Offices on the 5th November" (emphasis added).

Napo's negotiations with the government and probation managers fully accept that privatisation will happen. The union is involved in negotiating "[t]he

numbers of posts by job role available in the NPS or relevant CRC, places of work that will be available at the point of transfer from Trusts to the NPS or relevant CRC and thereafter, the terms of a Voluntary Redundancy Scheme, Access to the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) for existing staff and new recruits post 1st April 2014 and beyond, Information on how roles will change for serving staff depending on which part of the NPS or CRC they are transferred and the Negotiating machinery for post 1 April 2014.”

The Napo briefing states, “Separately, we still also have a number of unresolved issues around post-CRC [Community Rehabilitation Companies] share sale guarantees.”

Approximately 12,000 staff will not be taken on as part of the proposed changes and will be made redundant or transferred to private companies. There is no guarantee that workers in the National Probation Service will maintain their terms and conditions after October 2014.

The attacks follow the announcement of £2 billion cuts in the Ministry of Justice, representing 23 percent of its budget and 15,000 jobs to be implemented by 2015, cuts in pensions, and a public sector pay freeze. In Greater Manchester Probation Trust alone, more than 200 jobs were cut from a workforce of 1,421 in three years to March 2012. These resulted in employee stress and sickness and potentially dangerous mistakes being made supervising sex offenders and violent criminals as workloads increased.

Napo’s stated aim is to delay privatisation until a new Labour government is elected in 2015. It was Labour in power in 2007 that introduced the Offender Management Act, which introduced the privatisation process.

The Offender Rehabilitation Bill that completes this process is due to be passed in this sitting of Parliament. This is despite the leak of a Ministry of Justice risk assessment that cites “a more than 80 percent likelihood that an unacceptable drop in operational performance” during the privatisation will lead to “delivery failures and reputational damage”; a 51 percent to 80 percent likelihood that affordability objectives for the reforms cannot be demonstrated or met; and a risk that the programme “does not deliver to the agreed time, quality and cost, and neither impact nor likelihood have been worked out for this

apocalyptic outcome” because no costing has been made.

Private security firms Serco and G4S are able to bid for contracts despite being investigated as to whether they overcharged the government on the £700 million electronic tagging contracts signed in 2004 by claiming, among other things, that people who had died were still being tagged.

Napo’s appeals to the very forces who are implementing cuts and privatisation are a dead end. Probation workers must unite with other public sector workers such as teachers, firemen, hospital staff and local government workers who are facing the same attacks but are similarly divided, demoralised and chloroformed by the unions and Labour.

To fight back, workers must organise outside of the trade unions and establish their own independent committees. Integral to these must be the development of a socialist strategy to fight the entire privatisation process in unity with NHS workers, Royal Mail employees and firefighters, and all others who face the same devastating attacks on their jobs, conditions and livelihoods.



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