

# UK unions propose one-day protest strike over pay

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Trade unions representing over a million British local government workers have completed balloting their membership for a proposed one-day national strike on July 10 against the government 1 percent public sector pay rise until 2015-16.

Unison announced a vote in favour by 58.7 percent, with 49,836 for and 35,062 against. The union did not release the figures on how many were entitled to vote but has stated to the media it was around 400,000, representing a turnout of just over 20 percent. The GMB recorded a 3-to-1 vote majority with a participation rate of just 23 percent of its 220,000 membership. Unite, with a membership of 70,000 in local government, returned a majority for strike action of 68 percent, with no figures on participation, while the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) with around 250,000 members recorded a 73.7 percent vote in favour on a 24 percent turn in its consultation ballot. The National Union of Teachers (NUT), with a membership of 230,000, has already announced it will participate in the 24-hour stoppage based on an existing mandate over pay and pensions.

The majority votes based upon such extremely low turnouts demonstrate a lack of confidence that the unions will wage any fight.

Since coming to power in May 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition has been able to mount a one-sided assault on the working class thanks to the unions.

Local government workers' pay has been slashed by 18 percent in real terms since 2010 with three consecutive years of a pay freeze followed by below-inflation rises in 2013 and 2014. The imposition of the pay freeze within the public sector is symptomatic of a far wider destruction of jobs, wages and conditions.

The suppression of any opposition by the trade unions

is also measured in the burgeoning number of workers on zero-hour contracts, the one million young people unemployed and the endless rounds of attack on welfare benefits.

The proposed one-day strike on July 10 is an attempt by the trade union bureaucracy to bolster its sagging authority and prevent a genuine mobilisation taking place. Once again, the bureaucracy is reliant on the pseudo-left groups of the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) to provide it with some credibility.

The SP has attempted to associate the one-day protest with the 1926 General Strike. For the SWP, the general secretary of Unison, Dave Prentis, has become a poster boy whose rhetoric about July 10 launching an unprecedented wave of strike action is quoted approvingly. The opposition of Unison to any unified struggle is typified by its decision to ballot its members in the National Health Service (NHS) separately over the one percent pay ceiling, when some 600,000 health workers will be denied even for this measly sum.

Threats by sections of the trade union bureaucracy to organise coordinated strikes against the government have rung hollow over the last four years. The only national strike organised by the Trades Union Congress (TUC), in November 2011 over public-sector pensions, ended in total capitulation. At the time, the SWP and SP also hailed the one-day stoppage as the launch pad for a fight against austerity. For this reason, they now face additional problems pushing their line and seek to plug the credibility gap by minimising the extent of the previous betrayal.

The SP states, "It could and should have been the platform for decisive action that could have won a victory on pensions and blown a hole in Cameron's austerity offensive. Instead some union leaders,

particularly of Unison and the GMB, with the support of the TUC and its then general secretary—now ‘Sir’ Brendan Barber—stopped the struggle in its tracks.”

The attempt to pass off the capitulation of the TUC as the result of a handful of union bureaucrats does not wash. The trade unions had already agreed prior to the day of action to follow a divide-and-rule policy of negotiating separately on a scheme-specific basis. Within a matter of weeks after two million workers took part in the day of action, the TUC called off any further strikes and the government announced that its terms had been accepted without any significant changes.

Only a minority of trade unions did not sign up to the agreement. The PCS, NUT and University Colleges Union (UCU)—dubbed by the pseudo-left as the “rejectionist unions”—only exposed their refusal to wage any principled fight against the betrayal by the TUC majority. They first abandoned a one-day strike in March 2012 and then proceeded with a token one-day stoppage in May, which the NUT downgraded to a regional strike in London.

Shorn of the militant rhetoric, the so-called left-led trade unions do not differ from the rest of the TUC bureaucracy. They want nothing more than an accommodation with the government in which the burden of the attacks on the working class can be implemented with cosmetic changes and a confrontation headed off. However, the government has not obliged—leaving them increasingly exposed to a discontented and restive membership.

The disparity between the reality and the rhetoric of the SWP and SP over the July 10 day of action is all too apparent. The PCS, led by General Secretary Mark Serwotka, decided to hold a consultative ballot of its membership, even though it already has a live strike mandate over pay and pensions from March 2013. This is a union, in which the SP and SWP hold executive posts, using consultative ballots as a stalling operation. Its participation on July 10 would only be aimed at bringing the government into “meaningful negotiations.”

It is no different with the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) led by General Secretary Matt Wrack, another nominal left. Its decision to join the July 10 walk out is not a point of departure from its attempt to make a rotten deal with the government. Since September of last year,

the FBU has staged a total of 14 strikes over pensions and the increase in retirement age in the service from 55 to 60. Any idea that rolling action constitutes an escalation of a mobilisation is disproven by the fact that the last stoppage on June 21 was called for just seven hours.

The FBU was the first union to enter into scheme-specific negotiations with the government and to withdraw from the strike action in November 2011 on the pretext that it could negotiate a better deal. Wrack has signalled his support for a recent proposal by the Northern Ireland government to retain the retirement age at 55, at the expense of fire fighters still paying more for pensions which will be worth less on retirement. He has called for this to become the basis of an agreement in England and Wales.

The firefighters union has pursued the pensions issue to the exclusion of defending jobs and opposing the gutting of the service, with thousands of jobs axed over the last four years and fire stations closed.

For the SP and SWP, the role of the working class is restricted solely to accepting whatever token action is deemed permissible by the trade union bureaucracy, a bureaucracy in which the pseudo-left is firmly ensconced. A genuine mobilisation against austerity can only be prepared in a struggle to break the grip of the unions over the working class and advance a socialist programme.



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