

UK unions begin to demobilise their own pathetic protest strike

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British health and civil service workers are set to hold limited strike action on Monday and Wednesday next week. Local government and school support workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were also to have participated in an October 14 strike, to protest a 1 percent below inflation pay offer, but this was called off late yesterday afternoon by the Unison, GMB and Unite trade unions.

The strikes were all originally called to coincide with, boost and give undeserved credibility to the Trades Union Congress's (TUC) "Britain Needs a Pay Rise" march and rally to be held in London on October 18.

The remaining strikes are over pay, with many workers in the public sector unable to make ends meet after enduring years of pay cuts and freezes. Since 2010, wages of local government workers have been slashed by almost 20 percent to the extent that local government is now officially a minimum wage employer. When the national minimum wage rose by 19 pence to £6.50 an hour on October 1, many local government workers found themselves being paid that rate.

In ballots over the last weeks, public sector workers have generally recorded substantial majorities in favour of strike action. An indication of the growing anger of public sector workers over low pay and attacks on terms and conditions came when 26,000 members of the Royal College of Midwives voted to strike, for the first time in their history, by a majority of 82 percent.

In response to this mandate, the union bureaucracy in a number of unions have called the most token and fragmented strikes possible. Unison is Britain's largest public sector trade union, with over 1 million members, including 300,000 employed in the NHS. Its NHS members are to strike on October 13 for just four hours from 7 a.m. This will be followed by four days of

"action short of a strike."

Unite, Britain's largest union overall, has around 100,000 NHS members, who are also being called out for just four hours. This is to be followed by its members in England holding a work-to-rule between October 13 and November 9. Health sector members of the GMB in England and Northern Ireland are also striking for just four hours.

There will be no joint action of their members across the UK. Unison, Unite and the GMB are not balloting their membership in Scotland, as they reached a pay settlement with the Scottish government along the lines of the NHS Pay Review Body recommendation of the below-inflation uplift of the hourly rate for all NHS staff of 1 percent. Unison members in Wales were balloted separately over the terms of a pay settlement put forward by the Welsh Assembly. Unite members in Northern Ireland will even be striking during a different four hours (11 a.m. to 3 p.m.) on October 13.

An example of the unions' fragmentation and demobilisation of any united offensive by workers is that of the Society of Radiographers. Its 28,000 members are holding a strike on October 20, a week later than all other health workers.

Despite workers in both the public and private sector being hit with massive cuts in pay and other austerity measures since the 2008 global financial crisis, the strike is confined to the public sector. Not a single one of the UK's 2.6 million private sector union members were balloted for action.

Over the past four years, NHS workers have suffered huge cuts in pay. According to figures cited by Unite, workers covered under the national pay framework Agenda for Change have lost 12 to 15 percent of their purchasing power since 2010, amounting to £1,750 for the lowest paid, or £15,000 for the highest paid.

These pay cuts have been enforced with the collaboration of the trade union bureaucracy. In 2013 the health unions made concessions under Agenda for Change, agreeing to incremental pay progression being made dependent on meeting performance criteria. This ties staff to managing the fallout from the billions of pounds in cuts being made to the NHS budgets.

The union bureaucracy is working to ensure the pay dispute remains isolated and eventually defeated, as was the case with the public sector strikes against cuts in pensions in 2011. Even the threadbare industrial action scheduled for next week was too much for some, as the calling off of the local government and school support workers strike attests. Unison, GMB and Unite rushed to call off the strike without giving any public details of what the Local Government Association employers have proposed regarding pay—only stating that the proposals cover the period April 2014 to March 2016.

Further strikes may well be called off in the coming days. Whatever action the bureaucracy eventually sanctions, their main purpose is to lead workers into a dead end and corral them behind the TUC's latest annual "day of action" ritual. This is, in turn, a none too subtle means by which to tie workers to the Labour Party.

The TUC puts Labour forward as an alternative to the Conservatives, even as the party is on record that it will take over where the Tories left off in imposing savage cuts if it wins office in 2015. The unions would play a central role in this. As Labour Shadow Business Secretary Chuka Umunna told this year's TUC conference, "We need unions to be engaged" in "working with our businesses to transform themselves, harness new technologies and compete with India, China and beyond."

The upcoming strikes and the TUC's event has been hailed by the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party as evidence that the unions remain fighting organisations. The SWP commented, "Next week's strike is a good start. Now unions should call more coordinated action. This could boost workers' confidence to fight."

The Socialist Party's John McNally, the national vice president of the PCS civil servants' union, claimed the unions were a "force that is capable of stopping these cuts by campaigning against austerity."

What is the reality? The TUC and its affiliated unions have not lifted a finger in opposition to the most brutal attacks against the working class seen in a century, beyond its futile days of "action" where they make soon forgotten holiday speeches. The "Britain Needs a Pay Rise" campaign follows the TUC's "March for the alternative" event in 2011 and the much reduced in size October 2012 "Future that works" rally.

The TUC supported the 1997-2010 Labour government, under which pay inequality reached historically unprecedented levels. Under the Conservative-Liberal coalition that came to power after the hated Blair-Brown Labour government was forced from office, workers' pay has been allowed to plummet even further. Research commissioned by the TUC last year, based on an analysis of official statistics, found that total workers' pay was 7.5 percent lower in 2012 than on the eve of the recession in 2007. Adjusted for inflation, UK wages have fallen from a total of £690 billion in 2007 to £638 billion last year. This means that workers' pay was cut—by employers in collusion with the unions—by a staggering £52 billion, or more than £10 billion annually.



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