

Tens of thousands march in London against low wages

Paul Mitchell
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Around 80,000 overwhelmingly public sector workers took part in a “Britain needs a pay rise” march and rally in London on Saturday organised by the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Around 3,500 people attended a similar event in Glasgow under the banner “A Just Scotland,” and several hundred demonstrated in Belfast in Northern Ireland.

The march in London was divided into separate union contingents, each with its own colour-coded banners and balloons. The rally was addressed by the leaders of all the major public sector unions, who appealed to the government to change course and for the Labour Party to present an alternative.

TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady claimed the “massive turnout” would send a strong message to the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition:

“Our message is that after the longest and deepest pay squeeze in recorded history, it’s time to end the lock-out that has kept the vast majority from sharing in the economic recovery.”

“The average worker is £50 [US\$80] a week worse off than in 2007 and five million earn less than the living wage,” O’Grady complained.

Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey claimed the unions were involved in an “ongoing campaign to demand from the political elite” fairness, social justice, decent wages and an end to austerity. He said the government was determined to “dismantle the NHS [National Health Service] ... destroy the welfare state [and] devastate local government.” McCluskey appealed for “a [Labour] government that fights for working people like the Tories fight for the rich ... that offers a clear socialist alternative at the next election.”

“So I say to Labour—stop being scared of your own shadow,” he added. “Don’t shrink what you offer the British people. The time for being timid is past. Be

brave, be inspired by this march today.”

Sounding like a country parson, McCluskey cajoled the audience, “Hold on tight, comrades, keep the faith—keep fighting and victory will be ours.”

Communications Workers Union (CWU) leader Billy Hayes continued in a similar vein, declaring that despite government promises, austerity had not produced “a real recovery in the economy ... closed the public spending deficit ... led to a revival in manufacturing [or] led to a new wave of private sector investment.”

Hayes too pleaded with Labour to “break with austerity” and “commit to resolving the problems, not continuing the Tory and LibDem austerity policies.”

Of course, the Labour Party has no intention of breaking with austerity policies. The TUC has called for a £10 an hour minimum wage, but Labour Party leaders are only talking about a miserable increase to £8 by 2020 from the current £6.50 if they win power in next year’s elections. Financial analysts suggest the rate would probably rise above £8 by 2020 anyway based on current trends.

So anodyne is the TUC’s message that sections of the ruling elite have backed its call, concerned that low wages have led to poor consumer demand and falling prices and threaten deflation—and that rising inequality could provoke a social explosion. Institute of Directors campaigns chief Christian May declared, in response to the union rally, “We have sympathy with the TUC’s argument because it remains the case that too many people are still feeling the effects of the recession more keenly than the benefits of the recovery.

“When the TUC protests about the pay gap between bosses and workers, remember they are not talking about business in general, but about a tiny number of people who run the world’s biggest firms. The boards

of these companies can no longer be deaf to public opinion,” May added.

The demonstration was supposed to be the culmination of a week of strike action, but there was little joint action of union members planned across the UK. The strikes that took place were held on different days, or different times of the same day. Despite workers in both the public and private sector being hit since the 2008 global financial crisis, the strike was confined to the public sector. A number of strikes were cancelled at the last minute. All in all, a deliberately pathetic showing, aimed to demoralise more than anything else.

A four-hour strike by health workers, including nurses and midwives, went ahead on October 13, followed by a civil service strike on October 15 called by the Public and Commercial Services Union. A planned strike by 1.5 million council workers, scheduled to be held on October 14, was called off by the Unison, Unite and GMB unions who claimed a new offer from employers of 2.3 percent over two years and a lump-sum payment of up to £325 opened up the possibility for further talks. A not dissimilar deal—one percent in one year—was rejected by council workers and led to a strike in July.

GMB national official, Brian Strutton, complained, “It has proved extremely difficult to persuade the local government employers to agree new pay proposals for us to consult our members on. But now we have an agreed set of new proposals which we will consult on and while doing that GMB is suspending the strike planned for October 14.”

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) cancelled a 48-hour strike on October 14-16 and called off an overtime ban of London Underground workers claiming there was “significant movement” in talks over the closure of ticket offices and job cuts. RMT General Secretary Mike Cash declared, “The substantial improvements we have agreed allow us to move forwards ... But the union’s core opposition to the austerity-led cuts on London Underground has not shifted an inch and we remain vigilant for further developments and their impact.”

On October 14, the University and College Union called off its strike over a one-percent pay offer, after a High Court injunction brought by the Association of Colleges, which claimed the ballot used to justify the

action was too old. The miserly deal had previously been agreed by Unison, Unite, GMB, and the Association of Teachers and Lecturers.

At the October 18 rally, the trade union leaders spoke, not surprisingly, as though they have had nothing to do with the onslaught on living standards and declining wages. Over the last period they have demobilised all opposition in alliance with corporate management and governments in an attempt to make British capitalism more competitive.

The so-called left union leaders play a particularly pernicious role in all this. Only last month McCluskey’s Unite agreed to cut 900 jobs, slash pay by up to 30 percent and reduce the terms and conditions of the remaining workforce at Monarch Airlines, Britain’s oldest surviving carrier.

Hayes and the CWU oversaw the privatisation of Royal Mail last year, despite widespread opposition from the public and workers in the industry. Once it took place, the union quickly demonstrated its official role as industrial policeman by implementing the “Agenda for Growth, Stability and Long Term Success,” including bringing to a close 62 local disputes involving postal workers opposed to mail centre closures, exhausting workloads and victimisation.

In the year since privatisation, Royal Mail’s annual operating profits have jumped by 12 percent to £671million from £598 million for which the Royal Mail’s chief executive, Moya Greene, dutifully thanked the CWU, noting, “Our union has decided that, for the good of the company, and the people who work in it rely on us having better relationships and looking for less conflictual ways to resolve our differences.”



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