

Local government unions push acceptance of poverty pay in the UK

Tony Robson
12 November 2014

The Unite, Unison and GMB trade unions have abandoned any pretence of a struggle to end poverty pay for local government and school support staff.

The three unions, representing around 1.6 million local government workers, called off a scheduled one-day national strike in England, Wales and Northern Ireland on October 14. The strike was meant to coincide with a series of limited stoppages by National Health Service (NHS), civil service and further education workers to provide credibility to the TUC (Trades Union Congress) "Britain Needs a Pay Rise" national demonstration held October 18.

That the three biggest unions in the UK jettisoned even this limited action by the lowest-paid workers in the public sector demonstrated the fraudulent character of the TUC campaign. The justification by the unions that the one-day stoppage had to be suspended in order to consult the membership over a revised pay offer tabled by the Local Government Association is risible.

Unite, Unison and the GMB stated that their original pay claim for 2014-15 was for a minimum increase in the hourly rate of £1, to lift the lowest paid to achieve the Living Wage and the same flat-rate increase for all salary levels. Local government pay rates consist of a series of salary levels—each referred to as a Spinal Column Point (SCP) ranging from SCP 5 to SCP 49.

The unions are now attempting to steamroll through a deal which not only falls well short of this claim, but represents no significant improvement on the miserly 1 percent already rejected. It is little more than a repackaging of the government's pay restraint.

The current proposal is based on a two-year pay deal of 2.2 percent for those who earn £14,880 or above SCP 11. The majority of workers will therefore receive no more than 1 percent for 2014-15 and slightly less than the 1.2 percent for 2015-16.

Those on salary levels below SCP 11 would receive a higher-percentage increase of up to 8.56 percent for the bottom salary scale, but this still leave them below the Living Wage set at £7.85 per hour nationally and at £9.15 in London, which the unions formally champion.

Local government has become such a low-wage employer that its starting rate of pay fell below the adult minimum wage when the latter rose in October to £6.50 per hour. Those on this pay level, such as cleaners, catering assistants and school crossing patrol staff, had their pay increased just enough to meet the legal minimum requirement. Under the pay proposal SCP 5 would be scrapped and the lowest pay would start at £7.06 per hour.

The 2.2 percent pay increase is payable from January 2015. Even this miserable amount will not be back-paid to cover the nine months from March 2014. Instead, there would be a series of lump-sum payments—£325 for the lowest paid down to £100 for most workers. This is followed by further small sums to bring the amount to the equivalent of just one percent for 2014-15. This is non-consolidated and does not increase the basic pay rate.

The position of the unions on the pay proposal is contemptible. They are not prepared to make a formal recommendation on the miserable proposal, but have stated that there is little option other than to accept. Unite, Unison and the GMB issued a joint statement with the employers through the National Joint Council (NJC) describing the proposal as "the best that can be achieved through negotiation."

As far as the unions are concerned the impoverishment of their members is a secondary consideration to maintaining their privileged position within the negotiating apparatus.

A central factor in the unions' sabotage of the fight

against pay restraint is their alignment with the Labour Party.

Labour is fully committed to continuing the programme of austerity if it comes to power in May 2015. It intervened directly in the dispute demanding the unions call a halt to protests over poverty pay and the unions duly obliged. The leader of the LGA Labour Group, Jim McMahon, wrote a letter to Unison General Secretary Dave Prentis on October 9 in which he directed the unions to accept the revised pay proposal and “acknowledge to their members that this is a significant improvement on the original offer of 1 percent and that there is no recommendation to reject the pay offer.”

The letter reveals that cuts in local government spending will continue regardless of which party wins the 2015 general election. It states, “Local government has been hit hardest by central government cuts and with at least another two years of severe cuts to come, local councils are mindful of the impact of the pay increases on their base budgets.”

McMahon writes as a representative of Labour councils who have been responsible for enforcing nationwide cuts to local services. By 2015, the reduction in budgets will have reached 50 percent in some local authorities. Any reversal of the pay restraint, which has seen a decline in wages in real terms by up to 18 percent over the past four years, is viewed with hostility.

The Labour Party calculates that through a two-year pay deal below the rate of inflation, any further opposition to local government pay restraint could be ruled out for the first year of the next government.

Pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) are attempting to deflect opposition to the pay proposal down channels that do not challenge the unions. The SWP, through its Unite the Resistance faction in the union apparatus, is promoting an online petition directed to Unison’s NJC committee. While critical of the content of the pay proposal, the statement whitewashes those responsible. It describes calling off the strike as “a profound mistake”. In relation to the union’s foisting of the proposal on the membership, it meekly states that “it makes no sense.” The SWP goes no further than calling for a rejection of the proposal and the reinstatement of strikes, and promotes the passing of motions at branch level to requisition a

special local government service group conference.

The attempt to present the actions of the unions as inexplicable is aimed at covering up the SWP’s own role. The organisation hailed Unison and its General Secretary Dave Prentis, who presented the limited strike action authorised in local government and the National Health Service over pay, as the biggest wave of industrial unrest since the 1926 General Strike. The suspension of the national strike on October 14 was the second time action was called off by Unison—along with Unite and the GMB—with just one solitary national stoppage taking place on July 10.

The SWP has leading members in the higher echelons of the union bureaucracy, including on Unison’s national executive council. Another pseudo-left outfit, the Socialist Party, has no less than five members on the Unison NEC. Their role is to maintain the dominance of the trade union and labour bureaucracy. Paul Holmes, Unison national executive member for local government and a Labour Party supporter, has been given pride of place in leading a workshop at Unite the Resistance’s rally on November 15.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact