

UK probation workers vote to strike

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Probation workers in the Unison public sector trade union have voted by 73 percent to strike, after rejecting a zero percent pay offer for 2014.

A first strike, limited to 24 hours, is planned for June 11. Five weeks of action, short of strikes, are to follow from June 12. The latter action was supported by 88 percent of workers.

Unison, which represents 4,300 probation workers in England and Wales, in fact only called the strike ballots as a last resort. Dave Prentis, the General Secretary of Unison, declared, “But there is still time for more negotiations and for the employers to come up with a real pay offer.”

Unison has repeatedly betrayed struggles, including the 2011 national pension’s dispute. Unison and the other two union representing probation workers, the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) and the GMB, who have not even called a ballot on the pay offer, can be counted on sabotage of any genuine struggle.

The probation unions propose no coordinated action against attacks on jobs, workers’ terms and conditions, and service provision. Instead they are undermining a joint offensive of probation workers, not only against attacks on wages, following a pay freeze in place since 2010, but also in relation to 700 job cuts in six of the newly formed private Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) run by Sodexo. The CRCs were set up in April this year as a result of the privatisation of the probation services.

Shortly after Sodexo, in partnership with the charity NACRO (National Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders), signed six of the 21 CRC contracts, the French multinational announced 30 percent job cuts, at least 700 posts, to be implemented by May. The counties of Norfolk and Suffolk are expected to be the hardest hit, with the workforce slashed from 217 to 128. Cumbria would lose 123 jobs.

To date, there have been no announcements from other CRCs in relation to job cuts, but these are sure to follow.

These attacks have been facilitated through the collaboration of the union bureaucracy with successive governments. In October 2013, probation workers in NAPO voted to strike against the privatisation of 70 percent of the Probation Service. This resulted in two 24-hour strikes and another day and a half stoppage the following month. Eighty-five percent of Unison members voted for industrial action, but were not called out. The GMB did not even ballot for strike action.

This allowed the government to take the offensive. In February 2015, Chris Grayling, then justice secretary and Lord Chancellor, announced that 200,000 medium and low-risk offenders would be supervised by 21 CRCs, and 31,000 high-risk offenders would be managed by the public National Probation Service.

Sodexo and Interserve won 11 of the 21 contracts worth £450 million, which will last for 10 years, creating two virtual monopolies. Any cancellation of the contracts by the government will result in the CRCs receiving the full contract amount. This was the result of a penalty clause inserted by Grayling to ensure that a future Labour Party government would not be able to annul the contracts.

However, Labour abolishing the contracts was never in the cards. The party is fully supportive of private companies operating in the public sector. In May last year, Lord Wood, an aide to then Labour leader Ed Miliband, said politicians should not “fight ideological battles” over public sector services and that there was a role for private companies. Speaking at a conference of the Labour Party’s right-wing Progress grouping, favoured by its hated former Prime Minister Tony Blair, he said “more imagination” was required to improve public services when financial resources were scarce.

At the same event, Nita Clarke, an aide to Wood, said, “We have to be really careful that we’re not always seen as attacking the private sector and celebrating their failures,” adding, “We cannot afford to be rubbing our hands in glee because G4S [a private multinational with contracts throughout the public sector] have cocked up; that’s an insane strategy.”

Prior to the election, then Shadow Justice Minister Sadiq Khan reiterated that a Labour government would not repeal the 2007 Offender Management Act. It was Labour, in office in 2007, who passed the Act that began the probation privatisation process and laid the basis for the announcement of its full sell-off by the incoming 2010 Conservative/Liberal Democrat government.

Following Sodexo’s announcement of job losses, the probation unions responded by writing on April 16 to then permanent secretary to the Minister of Justice, Ursula Brennan, “that members may be forced to ballot for strike action if she did not intervene.”

However, an April 21 statement posted on the blog page of NAPO leader Ian Lawrence read, “NAPO’s position is that we do not believe the proposed job cuts are necessary or safe, but if some losses are unavoidable they must be on the terms agreed within the national agreements and replicated within the service level contracts.” In other words, the union will sanction job losses, as long as they are consulted and they go through the machinery set up by the union and management.

An enhanced voluntary redundancy scheme negotiated by the unions prior to the split of the probation service into the CRCs and the National Probation Service, to facilitate job cuts via the union mantra of “No compulsory redundancies,” was rejected by Sodexo as too costly.

NAPO appealed to Brennan to “instruct Sodexo to halt the planned job cuts until the public and staff can be assured that Sodexo’s plans have been fully scrutinized from both a staffing and a public safety point of view.” Once again, the message from the union was that jobs could go if they were consulted.

Sodexo intends to set up one administrative centre where presently there are staff employed in each CRC. According to the *Guardian*, they plan to introduce “biometric reporting” using cash machine-style kiosks where offenders report on probation via fingerprint

recognition with no need for face-to-face contact.

These cuts follow around 500 probation officers taking early retirement or leaving due to stress, disillusionment, or not wanting to work for private companies since the government split the probation service. At least 1,200 will have left by the end of this year.

Public sector workers face enormous attacks over the next five years, with the Conservative government proposing to axe 100,000 jobs. These include workers in the National Health Service, education, local government, as well as in criminal justice agencies.

The vote in favour of strikes by the Unison members reflects growing anger after five years of deepening cuts. This pits workers in a direct conflict with the unions, which are the vehicle of a privileged, parasitic bureaucracy that has nothing in common with the interested of rank-and-file workers. Prentis, who received a Unison salary and benefits totalling £112,114 in the financial year to December 2013, has also served as a paid non-executive director of the Bank of England since 2012.



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