

UK: Pay cap for majority of public sector workers to continue, despite government defeat

Robert Stevens
14 September 2017

The Conservative government suffered defeat in Parliament Wednesday as its Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) partners backed a Labour Party motion calling for an end to the one percent public sector pay cap for National Health Service (NHS) workers.

With the Tories abstaining on the vote, Labour's motion went through unopposed. The DUP also backed a Labour motion calling for this year's proposed rise in tuition fees to be reversed.

It is the first time the DUP has voted against the Tories after agreeing a "confidence and supply" arrangement to keep Theresa May's minority government in power. The result is non-binding, however.

The vote is indicative of concern in ruling circles at popular discontent over the seven-year pay cap on public sector workers, draconian austerity measures and the parlous state of the UK economy.

On Tuesday, the government announced it would lift the pay cap on prison guards and police officers. They will be given 1.7 percent and 2 percent respectively, under conditions in which the government is strengthening its law and order agenda.

Even so, the increases are still below the official inflation rate of 2.9 percent and are to be funded through further budget cuts. And they have only fuelled anger amongst other public sector workers.

August saw a further precipitous decline in living standards for all workers, due to the rising cost of fuel, clothes and food imports. The crisis engulfing millions was summed up by the Institute for Public Policy Research on Economic Justice think tank, which noted that the Britain is experiencing the longest period of earnings stagnation for 150 years. It found that GDP

per head has risen by 12 percent since 2010 but average earnings per employee have fallen by 6 percent. Wages as a share of national income are the lowest since the Second World War.

This is an indictment of the trade unions and the Labour Party, which have enabled the government to impose its austerity and pay freeze agenda without any serious challenge. Moreover, it was Labour that first introduced tuition fees in 1998, paving the way for the astronomical charges of £9,000 per annum today, which are set to rise in line with inflation.

It is to conceal their role in facilitating these attacks that they are now posturing as the opponents of low pay and tuition fees.

Speaking at the annual conference of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Tuesday, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn attacked the Tory pay award to police and prison guards as a policy of divide and rule and announced that a "Labour government will end the public sector pay cap and give all workers the pay rise they deserve and so desperately need."

Corbyn did not make a specific pledge on the amount of any pay rise, or when it would be honoured. Nor did he address the fact that Labour-run councils are implementing Tory policies—cutting services and ripping up employment contracts.

He made an oblique reference to the ongoing struggle by Birmingham refuse workers, stating that the "labour and trade union movement, have a duty... to find a resolution to this dispute as soon as possible."

Corbyn could not address the dispute honestly because it would show Labour's real stance behind his pious words. In Birmingham, England's second largest city, it is a Labour-run council that has sought to carry

out mass redundancies and attacks on refuse workers' pay and conditions. A series of walkouts by the workers resulted last week in Labour council leader John Clancy issuing redundancy notices to 113 workers, before being forced to resign just days later.

The situation in Birmingham is replicated across the country, including by the Labour council and Mayor in Bristol and in Salford, where they being pushed through by one of Corbyn's own supporters, Mayor Paul Dennett.

While Corbyn condemns the Tories for divide and rule policies, the fact is that Labour and the unions are the real specialists at this. The motion tabled in parliament Wednesday by Labour did not call for the scrapping of the pay cap for *all* workers. Instead it centred only on NHS employees, which it said should be given "a fair pay rise."

Labour's motion listed the deepening crisis in the NHS, which is facing its worst ever winter. In addition to chronic low pay and worsening conditions, the government's refusal to safeguard the rights of European Union citizens working in the country following Britain's exit from the EU has created a major staffing crisis that imperils the lives of thousands of workers and their families.

The same situation can be found across the public and private sector. Labour's decision to focus solely on the NHS is just as divisive as the Tories, with its implicit suggestion that some groups of workers are more deserving of a living wage than others.

The absence of any firm commitment quantifying the size of any pay rise is not an accident. Only last month Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell told the *Guardian* how he had sought to reassure "people in the City—asset managers, fund managers and... the London Stock Exchange" that they had nothing to fear from an incoming Labour government.

There is no way that the fundamentally conflicting interests of the working class can be reconciled with those of the financial oligarchy. For all their statements supposedly in support of workers, Labour and the TUC are seeking to suppress and police the class struggle.

That is why, when Labour's shadow Health Minister Jonathan Ashworth—one of the six MPs introducing the NHS motion—was asked if he supported strikes to reverse the pay cap, he responded, "[W]e don't want it to get to that stage. We don't want to see a strike. We

don't want to see nurses going on strike and wider public servants going on strike."

Asked if he supported anti-pay cap strikes that would be deemed illegal under the Tories anti-union laws, another shadow minister, Richard Burgon, refused to answer.

At the TUC conference, Len McCluskey, Unite General Secretary, made great play of the unions' preparedness to defy anti-union laws over public sector pay. The "concept" of "coordinated public service workers' action" was "very likely and very much on the cards", he said.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes, just three unions out of 50 have called only "consultative ballots" for industrial action, despite the government making clear the pay cap would continue for the majority of workers. All that TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady has proposed is a token 90-minute protest over pay on October 17.

That the ruling elite have the real measure of these anti-working class organisations was demonstrated in Tuesday's *Financial Times* editorial.

"Britain's departure from the EU single market and customs union leaves the economy vulnerable," the *Financial Times* wrote. This meant, "Britain's unions have an opportunity: their role is likely to become more important after the UK leaves the EU."

The mouthpiece of big business made clear that this depended on the unions' ensuring no "return to a more militant attitude of the past." Any "returning to the era of mass strikes and state aid to select industries" was forbidden, it cautioned. On this basis, the "unions can remain relevant if they use their power wisely," it reassured.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact