UK civil servants face crucial fight against jobs massacre

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31 May 2022

Boris Johnson's Conservative government has set a deadline of June 30 for secretaries of state to present plans for slashing jobs in their departments, as part of a proposed cull of 91,000 civil service jobs.

The civil service covers every aspect of public service and government policy support, encompassing daily necessities for millions of people, including welfare benefits, passports and vehicle registration. Final decisions on a three-year programme of cuts are planned for the autumn.

Johnson announced the jobs massacre a fortnight ago, calling for a reduction of civil service numbers by one-fifth, from 475,000 back to 2016 levels. In 2016, after five years of austerity under David Cameron's Conservative-Liberal Democrats coalition, the civil service employed 384,000, the lowest number since the end of World War II.

Nothing is off the table. Rees-Mogg, the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency, has mooted that the "simplest way" to achieve the job cuts is via a blanket recruitment freeze, as up to 38,000 staff leave the Civil Service each year.

A move towards that was this week's announcement that the Civil Service "fast stream" is to close for at least one year. The scheme offers a fast-track to senior roles, with more than 3,000 graduates joining via this route over past three years. The decision to freeze the scheme was pushed by Johnson and agreed at a Cabinet Office meeting on May 19.

The scale of cuts will eviscerate and destroy services. Two months ago, it was announced that 42 Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) offices will close, 13 with "no other strategic site nearby" for staff.

An ideological element is undoubtedly at play, with the Tories intent on destroying "big government". The *Daily Mail* cited government sources complaining that civil service numbers have ballooned due to Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, "We cannot let this bigger state become the new normal." Labour meanwhile will continue its role of "constructive opposition", helping Johnson and his cronies to complete the Thatcher revolution.

Johnson and Rees-Mogg have cynically presented their civil service cuts as a move to help those struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. This from a government that has refused even to reinstate the £20 weekly uplift to the main Universal Credit benefit, put in place during the pandemic but scrapped last October. The Resolution Foundation has assessed that an extra 1.3 million people, including 500,000 children, will be left in poverty this year as a result.

As ever greater numbers of people are thrown into poverty, the DWP plans to employ fewer staff to assist them. Therese Coffey, secretary of state for work and pensions, has unveiled her department's 2022-25 plan that includes a 12 percent cut in staff funding.

In opposing the job losses, workers are being pitched into a struggle not just against the Tories, but against the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS). The PCS, with 180,000 members, is the largest union in the sector, with tens of thousands of members in the civil service.

In a consultative ballot held earlier this year, PCS civil service members voted by an 81 percent majority that they would be willing to strike after rejecting a pay offer of just 2 percent along with attacks on their pensions. However, after years of the PCS refusing to fight anything, including throughout the pandemic, members expressed their frustration in a turnout of just 45 percentbelow the 50 percent required for a ballot to be recognised under anti-strike laws.

The PCS is attempting to stifle industrial action and keep the pay and pensions fight separate from any struggle against 91,000 job losses.

At its conference last week, the PSC put forward an emergency motion on pay and pensions, stating only that, "Conference agrees that we should work towards a national statutory ballot on industrial action in the early autumn, and that the form and scope of the ballot should take account of the consultative ballot results." With criminal complacency it said, "Conference instructs the NEC to: Declare a national dispute over pay, pensions and the CSCS… [Civil Service Compensation Scheme]: Hold a statutory industrial action

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ballot to begin in September 2022."

On the jobs cull, a PCS statement ahead of conference made clear there would be no immediate mobilisation. A statement read, "We have set our stall to protect the civil service by demanding the government fully consults with union officials about its plans…"

Presenting a separate motion on the jobs cull to conference, PCS DWP Group President Martin Cavanagh said it was made, "without consultation with staff or unions." Ignoring the mass sentiment that already exists in the membership for a fight, the motion merely proposed that "Conference instructs the NEC to: Build a campaign against the government's planned job cuts and for increased resourcing to deliver adequate public services." It would, "Work with the PCS Parliamentary Group to advance our campaign." No industrial action was proposed—even in the autumn—with the resolution stating the PCS would, "Use all means at our disposal to defend member's jobs and public services including industrial action when appropriate."

Both motions were passed unanimously by delegates, indicating willingness to fightback against the government's attacks.

The PCS has betrayed its members' struggles for decades. It has long been a base of operations for various pseudo-left tendencies whose members have worked as part of the union bureaucracy. The union is headed by Mark Serwotka, a member of the pseudo-left Socialist Organiser group in the 1980s and early 1990s, who became a supporter of the Socialist Workers Party-led Socialist Alliance, followed by the Respect organisation led by the SWP and George Galloway. With the backing of pseudo-left groups, Serwotka's speciality is bragging of his constant readiness to fight for his members and the entire working class—alone if necessary—while not lifting a finger to genuinely oppose the decimation of PCS members' pay, terms and conditions.

At the conference, Serwotka described the campaign against civil servants during the pandemic, "They came for our integrity, accusing us of being lazy because we worked from home. But then they came for our jobs …" #

In fact, at the pandemic's height, when workers were dying on the job through their criminal exposure to the virus, the PCS held just one union-authorised action over COVID workplace safety. The Swansea office of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency experienced the largest number of COVID infections linked to a single employer or workplace in Britain. PCS members took concerted strike action against management plans to bring hundreds of staff back into the office.

But the PCS refused to call for any broader mobilisation of its membership, instead criticising the government for prolonging the dispute and preventing an agreement between the PCS and management. The union devoted more effort to isolating and ending the dispute than to safeguarding workers' health.

The PSC is suffocating any industrial action, fully aware of the collective strength that its members wield. Speaking to the *Times* as the PCS conference was underway, Serwotka said, "What people would see [with the job losses] is that job centres would close, there would be nobody there overseeing collection of taxes, overseeing the minimum wage; the justice system would come to a halt… We have people at the ports, the airports, checking the passports, issuing driving licences, issuing passports and so much more. So clearly if those people were to take industrial action there would be a huge effect.

"It would certainly be something that the government couldn't ignore and I think our message will be today that nobody wants to go on strike, but it appears to be that unless we have that vote [at the conference] all our persuasive arguments to government have just been, frankly, ignored."

The fight against job losses cannot be left in the hands of the trade union bureaucracy. PCS members must turn to the formation of rank-and-file committees, operating independently of the PCS. These committees in every workplace should fight to link the struggle against low pay and attacks on pensions and conditions to the fight to defeat the Tories' plans to slash jobs.

Unlimited resources being made available for NATO's proxy war against Russia, but none to ensure job security and decent pay and conditions for millions of workers.

The conditions exist for a powerful counter-offensive. Last week 40,000 rail workers voted to strike in defence of jobs, pay and conditions, while 40,000 BT workers are being balloted for strike action. Every effort must be made to draw together these struggles, across every sector, in opposition to the efforts of the PCS and other unions to divide and rule. We urge staff in the civil service who want to take forward this fight to contact the Socialist Equality Party.

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