

# PCS union delays strike date announcement after largest ever vote by 100,000 UK civil servants

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**13 November 2022**

On Thursday the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union announced that 100,000 civil servants in Britain had voted for strike action for a pay increase and in defence of jobs and pensions.

The action was voted for across 126 employer areas including museum staff, driving examiners at the Department for Transport, job centre staff and those processing benefits at the Department of Work and Pensions, Border Force officials and passport workers. The average vote in favour was 86.2 percent, the largest mandate in the history of the union.

This pent-up opposition among civil service workers is a shared sentiment throughout the working class against the demand for further sacrifice and renewed austerity as the profits of the corporations and chief executives have soared throughout the pandemic.

In total 150,000 members of the PCS were balloted with an average turnout of 51.6 percent above the 50 percent threshold required under law. But the vote was conducted on a disaggregated basis. This means that 86 employer areas where the threshold was not met are excluded from taking action. In eight employer areas the turnout shortfall was as low as by one vote.

The PCS did not register a protest, such is the level of servility within the union hierarchy regarding the draconian anti-strike legislation used against their members. Civil service workers can be denied the right to strike by a government headed by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, appointed by the votes of just 200 Tory MP's through a palace coup leading to the coronation of the third Tory prime minister in three months. PCS members are now staring down the barrel of the austerity measures being prepared by Sunak, the near billionaire and personification of the financial oligarchy

that placed him in power.

The supposedly “left” general secretary of the PCS Mark Serwotka has stifled action throughout the summer as the attacks by the Tory government deepened. In April a well-below inflation pay increase of 2 percent was imposed. Since 2010 civil servants have experienced a 20 percent real terms decline in the pay even before the current inflationary surge. In the face of this the PCS only organised a consultative ballot over action and then used the low turnout in response to the toothless exercise to justify delaying a strike ballot.

In May the Johnson government outlined plans to slash 91,000 jobs by 2025, a fifth of the entire civil service workforce, followed by a consultation paper to reduce redundancy payments by a quarter in August.

The PCS announced at its annual conference in May that a statutory strike ballot would not begin until September 26 and run for six weeks until November 7. The failure to meet the turnout threshold as majority votes in favour were returned in the same areas expresses the lack of confidence in the union not a lack of fight among workers.

Even when handed the largest strike mandate in its history the PCS executive has again turned this into an appeal to work with the government. It stated that any confirmation of strikes dates would not be until November 18 to give the government time. It has written to the Cabinet appealing for “meaningful talks.”

Serwotka stated, “We are calling on the government to respond to our members’ demands. They have to give our members a 10 percent pay rise, job security, pensions justice and protected redundancy terms.”

This is all hot air. The PCS apparatus is searching for

a sell-out formula, with the announcement of strikes dates put back until after the Autumn statement by Chancellor Jeremy Hunt who is preparing “eye-watering” cuts to public spending.

Last week Sunak announced the withdrawal of the 91,000 job cuts, writing that he did not agree with “top down reductions in the civil service headcount”, but insisted on the framework of further cost cutting: “Instead, the chancellor and I will be asking every government department to look for the most effective ways to secure value and maximise efficiency within budgets so that we can use taxpayers’ money sustainably in the long term.”

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) tweeted, ‘Big win for civil servant trade unions’, regarding the withdrawal of the headline figure of mass redundancies. But this attempt to proclaim a U-turn has already come unstuck. The day after the vote for strike action, the Department of Works and Pensions launched a voluntary severance scheme for staff at 13 sites threatening hundreds of jobs in addition to the 28 other sites slated for closure with 800 jobs put at risk.

The PCS is just as fearful of a strike movement developing among its embattled membership as the government it is seeking to prop up. What the union bureaucracy is sitting on was revealed in a survey of 12,000 PCS members in August showing the impact of the cost-of-living crisis—with one in three skipping meals to save money. Other examples included 8 percent using foodbanks, 9 percent claiming benefits and 40 percent using credit or taking out a loan to buy essential groceries.

It is to reverse these attacks that civil servants have voted to take on the government, joining rail workers, BT/Openreach and postal workers and nurses and teachers who have voted for action. But as far as the PCS heads are concerned, they are to have no say over the action. Serwotka announced he would be meeting with other union representatives at the TUC regarding the possibility of co-ordinated action.

The *Socialist Worker* is desperate to cover for the sabotage being prepared by the PCS National Executive Committee and TUC. In its article, “Don’t delay after civil service strike vote” it appeals for the PCS to name a strike date while citing Serwotka “explaining” that the union “would only consider holding off action if the government ‘put on the table the commitment that

there is more money available for all members now’. And ‘that they are not going to cut our redundancy terms and they are going to enter into a discussion to give us job security’.”

It notes that the NEC voted Thursday to not even hold a token strike on November 30 with university staff and postal workers, reporting how “Socialist Worker supporters on the NEC had argued to strike on that day *but were heavily defeated.*” [Emphasis added]

Serwotka is following in the footsteps of other nominally “left” union bureaucrats, Mick Lynch of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union and Dave Ward of the Communication Workers Union (CWU). Their “Enough is Enough” rhetoric has given way to “intensive negotiations” with the employers based on cancelling 11 days of national strike action by more than 150,000 rail and postal workers this month. Closed door talks are the order of the day as they seek out a framework for imposing continued wage restraint, mass redundancies and overturning of terms and conditions.

Civil service workers are in the same position as rail, postal workers, BT, nurses and every other section of workers. If there is to be a genuine fight their struggle must be taken out of the hands of the union apparatus and independent demands drawn up by the rank and file to unify the struggles. The defence of jobs and fight against poverty pay by public sector workers who deliver the services on which millions depend must be linked to a broader fight against austerity. The wealth funnelled upwards through profit gouging, corporate bailouts and the bleeding of public services to fund the war against Russia in Ukraine must be placed under the control of the working class to provide decent jobs and wages and public services.



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