

PCS union sits on strike action by 100,000 civil servants against UK government

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The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union is sitting on strike action by 100,000 civil servants which has the potential to paralyse the Tory government in key departments.

Its nominally “left” general secretary Mark Serwotka, speaking at the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in October, made a tub-thumping speech promising unified action. It came with a warning to the assembled bureaucrats about their loss of credibility in the eyes of workers due to such pledges proving worthless in the past.

“I have made a number of speeches over the years saying that when history is written, the trade union movement will have been seen to have failed in fighting austerity, and we have to learn that lesson. And part of the lesson we have to learn, I think, is leaving individual battles to be fought on their own is a mistake – not joining up the dots between people who are in work and in trade unions, with those campaigns fighting in communities ranging on everything from climate justice to keeping public services open need to be joined up. We need more unity and less division. We don’t need lots of different campaigns calling different demonstrations on different days.”

Promises to learn past lessons and ensure more “unity” were swiftly broken. Serwotka’s speech came ahead of the results of a national strike ballot of 150,000 members of the PCS, the UK’s sixth largest union. The union’s national executive committee had delayed until September after the Tory government imposed a 2 percent pay award back in April, the lowest in the public sector last year.

The de facto pay cut, with inflation having already reached 9 percent CPI and 11 percent RPI, came on top of an estimated decline in pay of 20 percent in real terms since 2010. The average salary of a civil servant in the PCS is just £23,000. In a survey last August conducted by the union among a sample of 12,000 members, 8 percent

reported using food banks and 9 percent claiming benefits.

The result of the six-week strike ballot, announced November 10, registered the largest strike mandate in the history of the union, with a majority of 86.2 percent. This was based on a 10 percent pay demand, the defence of jobs and protection of pensions.

The average turnout across all balloted areas was 51.6 percent, exceeding the threshold set by the requiring at least half of eligible union members to vote in a postal ballot. But the decision by the PCS to hold the ballot on a disaggregated basis opened its members up to the anti-strike law blocking collective action by over three-quarters of its 190,000 national membership. Even where large majorities were announced, civil service workers were disqualified from the action at 86 employer areas. This included the strategic department of Her Majesties Revenue and Customs (HMRC), where 84 percent voted in favour but on a 47 percent turnout.

Among the 100,000 civil service workers at 124 employer areas which passed the benchmark, the PCS has limited walkouts to a fraction of those able to strike.

Strike action began at just two of the departments in mid-December: the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) and Rural Payments Agency (RPA). This did not prevent Serwotka from claiming, “the first wave of the hardest hitting industrial action the government has faced in decades.” The action at the DVSA and RPA has proceeded on a staggered and sectional basis through to this month. At the Driving Vehicle and Licensing Agency, strike action started on January 9 for five days, limited to work locations in Swansea and Birmingham.

Of the 100,000 civil service workers who can strike, no more than 5,000 PCS members have taken part in the “rolling action” until now.

Action at the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) between December 19 and 31 involved just four offices

targeted with closure. The action continued on a restricted basis up to January 7, with the addition of just two other locations. The DWP had already launched a voluntary severance scheme for staff at 13 sites in addition to 28 other sites slated for closure.

Ten days of strikes by traffic officers at National Highways from December 16 into the New Year also involved calling regions out separately, with the only national stoppage on January 3-4. This was meant to constitute co-ordinated action alongside the Rail, Maritime and Transport union two-day stoppage by 40,000 of its members at Network Rail and 14 train companies. Five days of National Highways action has continued from January 6, covering two locations and in two regions.

The role of the PCS leadership in preventing a co-ordinated fightback is epitomised by its refusal to oppose the government's drafting in of the armed forces as a strikebreaking force against 1,000 of its members at Border Force. During the eight-day strike action over Christmas from December 23 to New Year's Eve at six UK airports—London Gatwick and Heathrow, Manchester, Birmingham, Cardiff, Glasgow—and the Port of Newhaven, the army was deployed as part of the Sunak government's plans to cripple strike action, including through minimum service legislation.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace appeared alongside armed forces personnel at the passport counters, telling the media, "We're not going back to the 1970s where the trade union barons thought that they ran the government."

In the run-up to this act of intimidation, Serwotka complained about the army's lack of "adequate training" and "a knee-jerk response to try to undermine the strike," showing "a government totally mishandling the situation."

"If they're using the Army in our airports and to drive our ambulances, what's next? Will the Army be driving trains and teaching and standing in wards? Of course they can't."

Downplaying the threat posed to workers has already been shown to be criminally irresponsible. The *Observer* newspaper reported that the government considered stripping Border Force staff of the right to belong to a trade union, with striking or "inciting disaffection" made a criminal offence. Border Force staff have been earmarked as one of key sectors where the government aims to conscript workers to break lawfully organised action with the threat of dismissal.

In a March 7 press release, Serwotka states, "The

current government is more hardline even than Thatcher's. Rather than spend any time trying to resolve these disputes the government is actually trying to potentially take what are already the most restrictive anti-union laws in Europe and take them to levels I don't think anybody thought they would seriously contemplate."

The disbelief expressed by this so-called "left" firebrand disarms millions of workers faced with a threat to their most basic rights from a government headed by an unelected cabal representing the corporate and financial oligarchy.

Serwotka concluded by urging the government to "reconsider these draconian measures" and enter "meaningful negotiations."

The PCS then dutifully pledged to attend further talks this week with Cabinet Office minister Jeremy Quinn. Serwotka stated, "We will, of course, accept the invitation to the meeting, during which we shall tell him if he wants a resolution to the dispute he must put some money on the table."

There is nothing to negotiate with a government that is at war with the entire working class—only a sell-out agreement delivered up by the PCS.

As it enters further closed-door talks, the union states that a meeting of the national executive this week "will discuss calling out 100,000 members across the civil service for whom we have a strike mandate."

The executive must believe its members suffer from a form of collective amnesia. As the *World Socialist Web Site* when the PCS strike vote was announced in November:

"If there is to be a genuine fight the 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 for 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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