

British Library workers strike over poverty pay and declining services

Our reporters
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Over 300 workers at the British Library in St Pancras, London are engaged in a two-week strike until November 9 in pursuit of a wage increase.

The strikers are library assistants, conservation and shop workers and security staff. Although management has tried to keep areas of the library open, the strike has crippled its operation.

The members of the Public & Commercial Services Union (PCS) are demanding an above inflation settlement after rejecting a derisory 2.4 percent offer by a 98 percent vote. This amounted to a pay cut with RPI inflation at 4.5 percent.

The Library is run by the British Library Board and is funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The strike takes place in Prime Minister Keir Starmer's Holborn & St Pancras parliamentary constituency.

Staff at the library are among hundreds of thousands of public sector workers under attack by the Labour government. Tens of thousands of resident doctors are to strike from November 14 after being offered just 2.5 percent and educators in the school sector are being offered even less: a 6.5 percent offer spread over three years from 2026-27.

PCS members are also striking against the impact of a devastating cyber-attack—one of the worst in British history—on the library's systems in October 2023. This led to a major increase in workloads for frontline staff. Over two years later, library services remain crippled. Around 1.6 million people visit the site each year.

At lively pickets attended by hundreds of workers outside staff entrances, strikers spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters about the dispute.

One worker described conditions after the cyber-attack, and measures staff had taken to assist with restoring services: "Senior managers just made

themselves absent from the public-facing environments and the public were coming in very angry, very upset about the services that were disrupted, taking it out on the staff. And could you find a director, could you find someone senior? Of course not, they were never around." The striker added it was staff who came up with new ways to offer services.

Workers also described a daily battle with the impact of low pay, extortionate London rents, expensive transport and food inflation, forced to resort to unhealthy levels of overtime, taking second jobs, taking out loans with brutal interest rates and visiting food banks. Some colleagues had left to work in shops, supermarkets and restaurants.

A striker explained, "Last year the Library gave us 3 percent which was below the 5 percent of the remit of the government department [Department for Culture, Media and Sport], so the Library refused to meet that. And then this year they originally offered 1.6 percent and then 2.4 percent, it's just not enough. We obviously want back what we call 'stolen wages' because that was the remit and the library refused to pay it."

Another worker described the impact of successive wage cuts, saying, "It is a struggle. First, we have to come in every day, and that's paying for a fare to get here. We know food is going up.

"Some people I know that work in the Library have to use a food bank, or take an extra job, or do a ton of overtime, because they just have to make ends meet, and because we are just not getting fair pay. It is essential we get an above inflation pay rise; it is what we should have got about two to three years ago".

They added, "Most of the people out here on the picket line are the roots of the Library. If it wasn't for us it could not function; we are not appreciated whilst

you get people higher up that are getting the bonuses.”

Another picket said, “We love the library profession. When we entered it we knew it’s not banking, we knew it is not a very well paid profession, we’re never going to be millionaires. However, we would hope that an institution as revered as the British Library would at least be at the pinnacle of the profession in terms of pay.

“Colleagues have got doctorates, master’s degrees, they have huge student debts. And then they’re coming into the library on very minimal salary like £30,000 to £31,000 but they have got all of this other expense they have had to get, to get to where they are.”

One worker described how, “In the evenings some colleagues are going to work somewhere else because they just can’t afford to get by in an industry like this. It is becoming more difficult every year, just getting poorer. It is particularly hard for those who are the sole breadwinner and are thinking now, ‘I can’t work in the culture sector’.”

Strikers told the WSWs they had won widespread support for their action among the public and Library users—including researchers and historians—who have expressed dismay at the state of pay and conditions at a cultural centre of vast historical importance.

One told a union member that librarians “are heroes that don’t wear capes,” another that “I’m indebted to librarians for my career.”

A striker explained that the British Library, as a legal deposit library, has a “dual role of being a point of entry free for anybody, but also has the duty to collect the nation’s treasures. So everything that is published in this country is deposited with us and the fact that a lot of that material has just not been accessible for the last two years is scandalous.”

According to another, the library’s report into the cyber-attack admits that it was lack of investment in IT services “at the hands of successive governments” that prevented a more robust response.

In fighting for decent pay and conditions, British Library workers must turn to other workers in the culture and wider public sector also under attack. The end of the strike at the British Library coincides with the conclusion of a ballot by the PCS of 130 members working at art institutions Tate Britain, Tate Modern, Tate Liverpool and Tate St Ives. These have been offered a below inflation deal of 3 percent.

The PCS has made no call to unify even these two struggles—the Tate Britain, Tate Modern are also based in London—in a fight against the government’s cultural vandalism. The union made the Tate ballot “consultative” meaning that a vote to strike can be ignored. Instead, the PCS is directing its members and the supporters of the British Library strikers into the dead end of convincing a Parliament stacked with pro-austerity MPs to change course.

It requests those supporting the strikers to “Complete our e-action to ask MPs to call for increased grant in aid funding for the library”, and to “Ask your MP to support our Early Day Motion on pay at the library.” This motion—calling only for management to improve their offer—has enlisted the support of just 19 MPs out of 650, with just 10 from Starmer’s ruling party.



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