

UK civil servants hold national strike over pay pensions and jobs, as Tory government refuses concessions

Robert Stevens
3 May 2023

After months of sitting on a massive strike mandate, the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union staged only its third national strike of civil servants on April 28.

The strike involved 130,000 civil service workers in 132 government departments who walked out in an ongoing fight to win a pay rise. In April, the government offered workers a well below inflation pay deal of between 4.5 and 5 percent for this financial year, after suffering an imposed pay cut last year of just 2 percent. This as inflation has soared into double digits with the Retail Prices Index measure still at 13.4 for February. Since 2010 civil servants have experienced a 20 percent real terms collapse in pay, even before the current inflationary surge.

A recent PCS survey found that thousands of its members are struggling amid an escalating cost of living crisis. The survey of 35,568 members showed one in five Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) workers were in receipt of benefits, including Universal Credit, to supplement their wages. Seven percent of respondents have foodbanks or a foodshare system at work, 12 percent have a second or third job to boost their income. 11 percent had used foodbanks in the 12 months (up from 8 percent last year).

Previously the PCS called out its members on strike in separate 24-hour actions on February 1 and March 15, where there was industrial action ballot turnouts above 50 percent required under anti-strike legislation.

As is the common experiences of the trade union in every sector, the PCS is not calling for an above inflation pay deal, instead its claim is for a 10 percent rise and a living wage of “at least £15 an hour”. This is less than even the official measure of inflation used by

the government, CPI, which has been surging for months, remaining above 10 percent for the last two months.

Civil servants not only face continual pay restraint, but their entire livelihoods being destroyed. In May 2022, the then government of Boris Johnson outlined plans to slash 91,000 jobs by 2025, a fifth of the entire civil service workforce.

While not committing to this number in public, ministers in Rishi Sunak’s government have declared they will slash headcount. Asked in January by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee whether the government was still committed to reducing the civil service workforce, senior minister Oliver Dowden said, “Yes, is the short answer”, adding, “I’m determined to ensure we actually achieve a reduction... and a reduction in budget commensurate with that.” He declared, “the only difference” between Johnson’s plan and Sunak’s is that “we will be driven by outcomes”. These cost savings were “going to force better ways of working and certainly reduction in headcount as well”.

The result of the six-week strike ballot, announced November 10, registered the largest strike mandate in the history of the union, with an 86.2 percent majority, as workers in 214 government departments backed a fight for the 10 percent pay demand, the defence of jobs and protection of pensions.

Ever since the PCS has done everything to curtail action. Unified struggle by all PCS members was immediately hampered by the union bureaucracy’s decision to hold the ballot on a disaggregated basis, opening its members up to the anti-strike law blocking collective action by over three-quarters of its 190,000

national membership. The ballot result disqualified from action workers at 86 employer areas, included Her Majesties Revenue and Customs (HMRC), where 84 percent voted in favour but on a 47 percent turnout.

By the middle of January, of the 100,000 civil service workers able to strike under the ballot, no more than 5,000 PCS members had taken part in “rolling action”.

In recent months a few strikes impacting government administration have been held by the union, but these “targeted strikes” have been sporadic and isolated from each other. Among those striking were staff at the British Museum, British Library, National Highways, Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, Ofgem and Passport Office.

A further 15 days of such stoppages among passport office, job centre workers, and in personal taxation offices are being held in May and June.

The union’s current six-month legal mandate for strike action among 124,000 workers in 86 government departments expires on May 6, and it has organised a ballot to renew the mandate. This began March 20 and closes May 9, but is being utilised by the union bureaucracy only as leverage as it seeks a government agreement it can sell to its members and end the strike.

The union is led by nominally “left” General Secretary Mark Serwotka, who despite his occasional militant sounding holiday speeches has proven as much a tool of the ruling elite in suppressing strikes as any other union leader.

Throughout the dispute Serwotka has begged for a few crumbs from a Conservative government which refuses to make any concessions and for it to enter “meaningful negotiations.”

Ahead of last week’s national strike, Serwotka even portrayed the raft of below-inflation one-off payments that other workers in the public and private sectors have had imposed—in sell-outs negotiated by unions—as being a sound basis for resolving the PCS dispute.

“The evidence stacks up—ministers bullying their staff, giving our members the worst pay rise in the country, refusing to give them a back-dated pay claim or lump sum, like they’ve given everyone else, failing even to negotiate with us—so how else do you explain it?

“Ministers should be setting an example to employers, paying their own staff a fair wage, not leading the race to the bottom.”

In February, launching the campaign for the new mandate ballot, Serwotka commented, “The pressure is building on ministers. They’re being forced to talk to us, to listen to our concerns, and they now know we’re looking at escalating our strike action beyond May, unless they make concessions.

“Our members deserve a fair pay rise and we will not stop our campaign until ministers put money on the table.”

In suppressing a unified struggle of civil servants, the PSC has played a critical role—along with the bureaucracies heading the public sector trade unions in the health and education sectors, and in the private sector—in preventing a reckoning with a Tory government hell-bent on forcing the working class to pay for the vast bailouts handed to the corporations over the last 13 years and the NATO war in Ukraine.

Workers must not allow their struggle to be strangled, with the PCS bureaucracy reaching a sell-out deal with the government. The lessons of a strike wave being systematically dissipated by the unions must be understood and acted on. The Socialist Equality Party urges the formation by civil servants of rank-and-file committees to take the dispute out of the hands of the PCS leadership, breaking the isolation imposed by Serwotka and company.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact