

## **Strike against the government's public-sector pay freeze**

# **FOR A 24-HOUR ALL-PUBLIC SECTOR GENERAL STRIKE**

**T**oday's strike by teachers, civil servants, college lecturers, Birmingham council workers, Shelter housing workers and others is the biggest united strike by public-sector workers for decades. Workers have had enough and are standing up against government attacks on their already low pay.

The massive increase in prices has been the last straw. Gas prices have recently gone up by nearly 13%, electricity by nearly 8%, petrol by 20.5% and food by 7.4%.

Every time you go to the supermarket, prices have gone up over the previous week. Workers know this and won't be conned by the government fiddling the official retail price index.

Gordon Brown's policy of "limiting pay increases to little more than 2%" is exploding in his face. Never have so many workers in the public sector felt that they can no longer accept more years of pay cuts and more years of struggling to make ends meet.

The idea of uniting together to fight for better wages is not rocket science but unfortunately too many of our union leaders are scared to make the call for a united struggle.

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) was the first public-sector union to decide to take strike action over the government's pay limit policy, and now nearly 400,000 public-sector workers are due to be strike on today. The NUT has called out its 230,000 members after they rejected a pay award of 2.45% for this year as part of a three-year package that represents direct cuts in their pay packets. The Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) is calling out 100,000 of its members from ten separate parts of the civil service, from the Department for Work and Pensions to the Home Office, over pay "offers" that range from 0% to 2%.

The PCS with a left leadership, including many Socialist Party members, has been striving for years to get the other public sector unions behind them in a united fight and now at last



this is beginning to happen.

30,000 Further Education college lecturers from the University and College Union (UCU) are also taking action on 24 April, as part of their campaign to bring pay "up to that of school teachers" (it is 30% behind teachers at the moment and growing further apart year on year).

In addition, Birmingham council workers are striking for two days on 23 and 24 April as part of their ongoing opposition to the council's plans to introduce equal pay by cutting - by up to £15,000 - the wages of many of the workers. Over 40,000 workers are affected.

In the words of the Financial Times, a "much bigger threat"

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than the 24 April action is looming from 1.5 million local council workers who are in the process of being consulted over a similar three-year deal to that of the teachers. The recommendation from the union leaders is to reject the offer.

In the NHS, one million health workers have been "offered" a three-year deal as well. (Unison as the biggest NHS union is now consulting its members on the offer, unfortunately without a recommendation to reject what is yet another pay cut in reality.)

An added twist to this year's wage rounds (40% of all wage agreements are due in April) is the deepening crisis in the economy. The growth of unemployment and the fall in the income of working people and therefore tax payments to the treasury, are already affecting the government budget.

In the private sector, according to Income Data Services, wage increases are on average around 4%. But this is not expected to continue into the recession itself. Financial commentators refer here to the possibility of wage cuts and forcing more full-time workers onto part-time contracts as the markets for goods and services fall. This way they expect that unemployment will be kept down, though the effect on workers' living standards as a whole will be the same; that is, they will be squeezed.

So private-sector workers will soon have to turn to the example being set by sections of the public-sector workforce and take action to defend their living standards.

24 April will be of significance in the battle to defend workers' wages, but only if it is seen as the beginning of a determined fight and not just as a means of letting off steam. Unions like the PCS, RMT (rail workers) and the POA (prison officers who shook the government last year in a lightning 24 hour strike without any notice) have shown the way in being prepared to take action when necessary. DWP workers in the PCS have now struck on 21 days in less than four years in defence of their conditions.

The public-sector trade union leaders should now be prepared to name a day for a national all public sector general strike.

This would raise the confidence of millions of workers and demonstrate who has the real power in society. It would give a massive shock to the government that they will be swept aside if they continue to try and make workers pay for the crisis in the system.

Working people need, as well as their trade unions, a political voice to put their side of the arguments in parliament and the council chamber. All three main political parties are deafening in their silence against the strikes today or openly opposed to them. That is why the Socialist Party is leading the campaign for a new mass workers' party which will be a voice for all those who face the attacks of the bosses.

Come to our meetings and join us in the fight for a socialist society which represents the interests of the millions and not the millionaires.

To join or find out more information about the Socialist Party, return this to: PO Box 24697, London E11 1YD, email [join@socialistparty.org.uk](mailto:join@socialistparty.org.uk) or ring 020 8988 8777. [www.socialistparty.org.uk](http://www.socialistparty.org.uk)

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