



STOP THE PENSIONS ROBBERY FOR A ONE-DAY STRIKE TO HALT NEW LABOUR'S PLANS

MILLIONS OF public-sector workers are facing daylight robbery from their pensions by this government. Some local government workers will be affected from as early as April 2005. After that, the government plans a whole wave of changes to public-sector pensions which, unless successfully fought off, could mean:

- An end to final salary pension schemes.
- An end to retirement at 60 - no matter how many years of service have been worked.
- An increase in workers' contributions whilst the government cuts its contributions.
- The bringing in of new sickness regulations.

Public-sector workers will have seen what has happened to workers in the private sector: workers like those at Turner and Newall who have seen their pensions reduced to nothing by the actions of the company. They will want their union leaders to deliver a fight that forces the government to drop its plans.

In both the private and public sector workers are being told there is a pensions' crisis. If there is a crisis then it is one of the bosses and the government's making. For all workers, pensions are in effect deferred wages. Any attempts to change them amount to a pay cut.

For 20 years bosses took contributions holidays and raided pension funds. Now the stock market is declining they bleat there is not enough money in the pot to pay out for current and future pensions - conveniently forgetting the £20 billion they have effectively robbed from the pension funds since the early 1980s.

The bosses have done this to ensure their capitalist system increases its profitability. According to the TUC, profits in companies that ended final-salary pension schemes shot up by £4 billion after the bosses cut their contributions to pension schemes.

At the same time, Chancellor Gordon Brown, claims

there is not enough money in the Treasury to pay for the private sector's pension crisis or to pay the government's own commitments as an employer. Again, Brown conveniently forgets the tens of billions that have been handed out in cuts in corporation tax and other handouts to big business in recent years.

And the government has allowed the rich to get even wealthier since 1997. Yet, they refuse to raise the level of income tax on the super rich who are laughing all the way to the bank.

The super-rich have doubled their wealth since New Labour came to power in 1997 - an average of £737,000 per person in the top one per cent. And they have increased their share of the national wealth from 20% to 23% in the same period, according to the Office for National Statistics. (Guardian, 8 December 2004).

Gordon Brown is facing a public spending black hole because of this obscene generosity to the wealthy and big business. In order to balance his books he is desperate to cut as much public spending as possible and wants to follow the road trodden by private employers in effectively cutting workers' pay by slashing their pensions.

In response, GMB union leader Kevin Curran and Dave Prentis of UNISON, under increasing pressure from their angry members, have warned of strike action by public-sector workers before a likely general election in 2005.

Public sector workers looking for a lead will welcome these statements. But they will want to know these are not just words designed to get minimal government concessions.

Union leaders played a similar game before the Labour policy summit in Warwick last July. They thought they had won important concessions from the government - including on the issue of pensions - but just months later most of the promises look worthless.

NO INCREASE IN RETIREMENT AGE NO INCREASE IN CONTRIBUTIONS

The government is aware of the outcry these proposals are causing and has made some cosmetic changes to their plans. It's possible they may temporarily retreat and defer or lengthen the timescale of introducing changes to avoid a public-sector general strike in the immediate run-up to the general election. And, although this in itself would be a partial victory, it would only be a temporary stay of execution.



The unions need to follow the lead given by Mark Serwotka, PCS general secretary, and the PCS union which is clearly calling for the unions to adopt a joint negotiating position and for co-ordinated strike action in spring 2005 by education, health, local government and civil service workers. Public-sector workers and trade unionists will instinctively understand that the best time to take action and force the government to fully retreat would be before a general election.

Public-sector trade unionists must demand that their leaders don't let New Labour off the hook and organise one-day strike action before a general election.

There are two groups of public servants who are exempted from the current proposed changes: MPs who recently voted themselves the best pension scheme in Europe and say they can't afford it for anyone else and top judges who threatened a withdrawal of labour if their privileged pensions were touched.

For once, workers will want to take an example from the judges and take action to protect their pensions. Some workers - like in Rolls-Royce and Network Rail - have threatened or taken strike action and forced the bosses to retain final salary pension schemes.

A few unions, like the NUT teachers and Fire Brigades

Union, already have conference decisions committing the union to industrial action if their pension schemes are changed. The local government section of UNISON has lodged a request to hold a ballot for industrial action over pensions.

A number of local NUT associations have held indicative ballots showing strong support for industrial action to protect their pensions.

Over the next month trade union leaders will be consulting their executives and memberships over what to do next. Socialist Party trade unionists will be asking trade union members to call on their leaders to co-ordinate industrial action and force the government back. In particular, branches and union organisations should pass resolutions committing their union to supporting and organising a one-day strike by public-sector unions and workers.

Suggested resolution on public-sector action

This committee/branch etc fully supports the call made by Mark Serwotka, PCS general secretary, for a co-ordinated one-day public-sector strike in early spring 2005 to defend pensions. This call was made at the TUC lobby of Parliament on 16 November 2004.

We must, as Mark said, avoid the danger of the unions acting separately on this issue and on the general defence of public services. We must not let the government pick off unions one by one. We believe that a common negotiating stance involving 'unity in action' is essential.

We therefore call on our union national executive to:

- * Call on TUC public-sector unions to convene a meeting of representative delegations of all unions involved, to prepare co-ordinated action.
- * Back plans for a day of strike action in early spring 2005 against government pension plans.
- * Ensure the TUC organises a series of mass union meetings and public rallies before a one-day strike to guarantee the largest possible participation from trade union members and the general public.

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