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**Britain**

# **N30: unions strike a blow against weak government**

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**The strike on Wednesday 30th November in Britain in defence of pensions for public sector workers was the largest seen for a generation. Over 29 unions were involved including the three biggest, UNISON, UNITE, and the GMB. All together, over 2.5 million workers were on strike across the National Health Service, local councils and throughout national government departments.**

Demonstrations were held in many places, including in small towns which had never seen a protest since the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003. Over 50,000 took to the streets in London and 15,000 in Belfast, but there were also 100 in Lerwick in Shetland! For the overwhelming majority of those who took action on 30th November, it was the first time that they were on strike. Two out of three schools were closed, museums and tribunals were closed, and non-emergency operations in many hospitals were cancelled.

The strike was a tremendous success not just because of its size, but because everybody knew that it was not just about pensions, but also about the defence of public services and ultimately, who pays for the crisis. It put the issue of fair pensions for all on the agenda.

The Tory-led government has been arguing that it is not fair that public sector workers get a better pension than those working in the private sector. However, they say nothing about the multi-million yearly earnings that bankers get such as the Â£7million pocketed by the heads of Barclays and Royal Bank of Scotland. There are over 2.5 million pensioners living below the poverty level of Â£178 a week. Pensioner poverty in Britain is among the worst in Europe – there are only three countries in Europe that have worse pension provision than those in Britain, that is Cyprus, Latvia and Estonia ! France spends twice as much on pensions than does the UK.

The strike was a long time in coming. The Tory led coalition government announced as soon as it was elected that it would unleash war on public services, and the pay and conditions of workers in general. Although the TUC agreed in September 2010 to organise co-ordinated national industrial action against these attacks, it took six months to organise a national demonstration on 26th March of 500,000. Despite this tremendous success, the leadership of the three big unions and the TUC were reluctant to organise action. It was only because of a hugely successful strike on 30th June by the teaching unions UCU, NASWUT and NUT and the PCS civil servants union, that all the other unions and the TUC decided to call on their members to strike.

The leadership of most unions were pushed into organising for the strike because of pressure from their members wanting action and because they had no longer any choice but to do something. The government had been dragging out negotiations since the beginning of the year without any concessions, and had even imposed some unilateral changes to the pension schemes including pushing back the retirement age to 67 for younger workers.

The Tory government is now increasing the attacks on the working class as the recession is now on the verge of turning into a depression: public sector workers already suffering from a two-year pay freeze will see any increase “capped” at 1 per cent. With inflation running at 5.4 per cent, this is effectively a 20 per cent pay cut over four years. The government announced that 710,000 will go, up from the 400,000 announced last year! Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said he would do “whatever it takes” to cut the deficit. This means tax breaks for the rich and corporations funded by taking money from the rest of us.

The strike on 30th November can only be a beginning in the resistance against the Tory-led coalition government. The action needs to be escalated with dates for action set for early next year involving private sector workers. Youth

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and students need to be involved as stopping pushing back the retirement age would immediately deal with youth unemployment now at a record level of over 1 million or 20% of those under 25.

This is not just a crisis of the British economy. It is a crisis of the capitalist system which is attempting to make the working class pay for it. The action in Britain on Wednesday 30th November was followed on Thursday by a one-day general strike in Greece and on Friday by joint-union action in Belgium. The need for a European-wide solidarity and joint action is now more necessary than ever to roll back the neo-liberal assault on all of the post-war gains.