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Britain

One million strike to defend pensions

- News from around the world -

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More than one million workers across Britain took strike action on March 28 in defence of their pension rights.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/pension.jpg>]

Services were brought to a standstill as the whole transport network closed down in the city of Newcastle in the North East of England, and in the North of Ireland while closure of the Mersey tunnels in Liverpool affected thousands of commuters as did the shutting down of Glasgow's metro system. 17,500 schools closed for the day, as did many libraries; leisure centres and council refuse depots.

In most local areas workers not only mounted picket lines but then went on to hold local rallies which activists say were better attended than similar events on other recent one day strikes. In London a central rally was held later in the day, attended by thousands of strikers.

Eleven unions in local government were involved in the day's action which focused on the so-called "Rule of 85" - which allows council employees to retire on full pensions at 60, provided their age and years of service add up to 85.

A similar attack was facing even larger numbers of public sector workers last year. If there had been a united response then, the possibility of even more workers taking strike action and the government being forced to back down would have been greater.

Unfortunately in October 2005, the leaders of other public sector unions including the teachers and civil service union agreed a deal. This agreement protected the rights of existing members of their pension schemes to retire at 60, but means that new workers will have to work to at least 65.

But even that compromise was not on the table for local government workers. Following the strike, the New Labour government have dug their heels in by moving on March 30 to speed up the parliamentary timetable to introduce these changes.

The unions involved have reacted angrily to these moves, and the largest of them, UNISON has already laid out a programme of selective action involving more than one million members throughout April.

Labour is also siding up with the private sector employers in describing the council workers as privileged. This is despite the fact that the average pension drawn by council workers is Â£3,800 a year and for women Â£1,600, forcing many into poverty in their old age. This is in contrast to the average pension of directors in the top 100 British companies which is Â£167,000 a year.

UNISON, along with the other unions is also seriously considering taking strike action on the 4th May, the day of the local council elections. This would maximise publicity for the dispute and threaten to punish in the ballot box all the candidates from parties that support an attack on the pension fund.

In an unprecedented move, Labour Link, the committee of UNISON that deals with working with and making donations to Labour, has decided to is withdraw any funding or any leafleting for the Party right across England until the dispute is settled.