

HALF A MILLION ON STRIKE

by New Worker correspondent

A RERUN of the 1926 General Strike it wasn't but the widespread industrial action on display on Wednesday was certainly impressive. For once, several ongoing separate industrial disputes timed their strikes for a single day.

Schoolteachers, university workers from dons to security guards, civil servants of all sorts, train and bus drivers all took part in the biggest display of industrial muscle since 2011.

About half a million workers were on strike. All had the common aim: that of securing pay rises to beat, or at least match, the present rocketing inflation, often to compensate for a decade of austerity. They included about 100,000 civil servants in PCS and 70,000 University and College Union (UCU) members. Some 300,000 NEU teachers in England and Wales (joined by their colleagues from the EIS in Aberdeenshire and Clackmannanshire) caused 85 per cent of schools to close.

Strike action by 15,000 ASLEF train drivers brought services on 15 train operating companies to a halt. In south and south west London 1,900 striking bus drivers, who already have had 21 days of strikes, had the same impact on bus services.

The RMT members who have been involved in major strike action were not on strike that day. They have

been offered a new deal that is under consideration. Postal workers who had been involved in nationwide strikes before Christmas and have unresolved issues were also at work, and firefighters have yet to start the actions they have voted for.

PCS's action closed Jobcentres, border checkpoints and even the British Museum, so tourists will have to contemplate the grandeur of the Elgin Marbles some other day.

rallies

Strike action was accompanied by a number of rallies in support of the strikes and in opposition to the latest anti-strike laws presently going through Parliament. A large demonstration in support of the teachers took place in Westminster whilst striking civil servants gathered outside the Cabinet Office.

At a picket line outside the Treasury, PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka demonstrated the urgency of the pay demands by pointing out that: "PCS members are currently using foodbanks. They are claiming in-work benefits, tens of thousands of them are on the national minimum wage. That's a scandal."

The central London rallies were paralleled by smaller but equally enthusiast gatherings up and down the country. Over 1,000 strikers and supporters marched in Portsmouth, whilst Leeds City Hall was the scene of an equally sized rally. By all accounts Labour MPs were conspicuous by their absence, but Jeremy Corbyn addressed



at his local Islington College.

Wednesday's events were positive, but they should be seen as a good beginning rather than a one-off event. Former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell said that the pay demands could easily be met simply by raising capital gains tax from 18 to 20 per cent, which would raise £17 billion, but there is no sign that the Tory Government will be doing anything as revolutionary as that nor that is going to cough up decent public sector pay rises any time soon.

not impressed

Claims by the Education Secretary that teachers were getting a 15.9 per cent rise unsurprisingly turned out to apply only to a very small number of new teachers. Train unions are not impressed by pay offers that come with further job losses and worsened conditions.

It was telling that Jake

Berry MP, one of the many former Tory ministers and party chairmen around these days, felt able to joke about the Civil Service picket lines by observing: "I haven't seen this many civil servants in Whitehall since the start of the pandemic." This can be taken as a warning that a great deal more needs to be done to ensure that industrial action is effective and not seen by the

ruling classes as some sort of minor inconvenience they can ride out when workers start feeling the effect of lost pay.

Whilst there has been a welcome rise in trade union membership recently, much urgently needs to be done to boost the present membership numbers, which are only about a half of what they were 40 years ago when the workforce was considerably smaller.

FUND

This week's postbag brought in a bumper £1,200 thanks to supporters all over the country including comrades in Ripley who sent £60 and a Hull supporter who sent in £6 as well as £10 from another in Athens and £100 from a supporter in Germany. The January appeal raised £2,820 sadly well short of our £3,500. Nevertheless tomorrow is always another day so lets see what we can do in February to keep our presses rolling!

The strikes across the country, the struggles on the street, the fight for peace and socialism mean we must keep going. But we can only do it with your help. All donations, big or small, help keep our presses rolling. Please send your donation to: New Worker Fund, PO Box 73, London SW11 2PQ. Cheques and postal orders should be made payable to the 'New Worker'.

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