

DEBATES IN THE WORKPLACE

Pensions deal has let millions of workers down

Last week New Labour and unions representing public sector workers announced a deal over pensions. Under the proposal, existing teachers, civil service workers and health workers will retain the right to retire at 60.

This marks a retreat from the government's original plan to make these groups work to the age of 65. But new workers will be exempt from the deal and will have to work an extra five years or pay greater contributions if they want to retire early.

The deal also excludes local government workers. This threatens to break the unity that forced the government to withdraw their earlier proposal in March this year.

Socialist Worker spoke to a range of workers about their thoughts on the deal. All comments are in a personal capacity.

BARRY CONWAY, branch secretary Bolton National Union of Teachers (NUT)

More backward employers have gone into a paroxysm of rage over the government's climbdown on pensions.

But the more intelligent know they have achieved a significant victory—not, paradoxically, in the formal offensive of getting people to work until 65.

What New Labour and the employers understand is that you can set the retirement age at any level you like, so long as workers cannot afford to retire.

The teacher who effectively kicked off our pension campaign in Bolton has written to me to tell me that new pay restructuring will reduce his salary to such an extent that he will be unable to retire at 60.

On the other side of Bolton a planned academy will, if it goes ahead, take another crop of teachers above the 60 year ceiling.

Following the pensions deal we will be writing to our members telling them that we should be proud of the effort put in to push this issue to the forefront of the agenda.

In terms of what we wanted, the right to retire at 60, we have come through with flying colours.

As from next year we will tell all new entrants that we fought and won this right, but that our union leaders failed to follow up this success and drive home the advantage.

There is no reason why we can't revisit this issue at a later date.

The government will try to snatch a victory from its initial defeat by forcing through

'For the battles ahead against privatisation we need the broadest unity, not a legacy of division'

the grotesque Rewards and Incentives productivity deal for teachers, and forcing through its academy programme.

We need to be ready to resist these measures.

ANDY STONE, trainee teacher

People doing teacher training are already having to pay for their college fees—now we're being told we have to work an extra five years.

I don't understand how any of the union leaders can see this deal as a victory. I went to the NUT website and clicked on "professional unity" and the website crashed—which says it all really.

KEN MULLER, NUT rep, Islington Green School

I am appalled at the agreement on pensions. I was too old to be affected by the previous proposals for teachers' pensions.

However, I was prepared to strike along with my colleagues, not out of self interest, but in solidarity with younger colleagues and later generations of public sector workers—which may include my own children.

This deal sells those who come after us down the river, and threatens to create divisions between new and existing public sector workers.

The fact that the government was prepared to retreat in the face of threatened strike action shows that we could have won much more.

The NUT should reject this deal and fight alongside other public sector unions to defend the right of this and future generations to retire at 60.

JON LOCKE, acting union convenor at Rolls Royce

We've got a three-year review coming up for our pensions.

No doubt the company will want to take more money off us, even though they're flush with cash. People feel very strongly about the issue of pensions.

The deal in the public sector looks good for existing workers—but not new ones.

It will add to the idea that we should all be working longer. I'm certainly not looking forward to working that long.

HENRY RAJCH, GMB local government branch secretary in Barnsley

The papers are saying that this is a good deal for the public sector, but we're not even included in the deal.

And even if we were, there is a two-tier aspect to it that I find totally unacceptable.

People I represent are saying they can't work until they are 65. They are manual workers—the work means you physically deteriorate.

There is already a problem because pensions are calculated on your final salary. But often manual workers end up in lower paid jobs as they get older.

The threat of strike action in spring faced off the government's attack.

My union didn't join that action. They are saying they want to negotiate without



strike action. But GMB members would support strikes over pensions if they were asked.

EMMA BOYD, PCS civil service workers' union rep in Defra

At first we were quite pleased with the deal, but then we read more about it and that's when we started to worry.

When the unions started building the campaign over public sector pensions they said that unity was the key—everyone standing together. Part of the fight was about protecting future workers.

But this deal does not include future civil service workers, and other groups, such as local government workers, seem to have been left out to dry.

I'm in my 20s. I always wanted to work in the public sector, to help people, and I was prepared to put up with the low pay if I knew I had a decent pension to look forward to.

Under this deal, in 30 years time I will be in a tiny minority of civil service workers allowed to retire at 60.

What's to stop the government then—Tory or Labour—saying that I have to work till 65?

'We need unity across the public sector to stop this divide and rule'

MLADEN MARIC, assistant branch secretary Brent local government Unison

'This looks like divide and rule to me. Unison should be working across the whole public sector—with Unison members in health and local government—and uniting with other public sector unions such as the PCS.

Building that unity is the main question for activists like myself. We need joint union rallies over pensions and a serious campaign among rank and file members.

Workers, including those who have not been the most active union members in the past, are really passionate about this issue.

We need to put pressure on people who are negotiating on our behalf and we can have no illusions that the government will deliver for us without a serious fight.'



MARK LADBROOKE, Oxford health worker and member of Unison's health service group executive

'If health workers sign off this deal without seeing our brothers and sisters in local government right, then this agreement will return to haunt us.

For the battles ahead against privatisation and the destruction of the NHS we need the broadest unity of working people—not a legacy

of division and recrimination. It's simple. Our union needs to do what it says on the tin—act in Unison.'

KAREN REISSMANN, chair Manchester community and mental health Unison

'I went round a ward and easily filled 12 sheets of a petition calling on the union leaders not to sell our children's pensions.

I felt proud of the solidarity between generations. People were pleased about their own situation, but angry that our children get such a rough deal—over tuition fees, low pay and now pensions.

There was a strong feeling that unions exist to defend everyone, and that this is a short sighted deal.

One person felt, with all Blair's attacks, this might be the best we could do. But after a discussion about the possibility of a fightback, she changed her mind.'