

Historic public sector strike in Northern Ireland as a UK local government crisis looms

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An unprecedented strike, writes Phil Hearse, by 170,000 public sector workers across 15 unions in Northern Ireland took place on January 16 over the UK government's refusal to pay parity wages with other UK workers, spotlighting a growing crisis in local governance and public sector funding across Britain.

An unprecedented strike took place in Northern Ireland on January 16 with 170,000 public sector workers from 15 unions, angry at the refusal of the UK government to pay them parity wages with other UK workers.

This crisis stems from the refusal of the Democratic Unionist Party to sanction a new power-sharing government, a refusal that has lasted for two years. An order from the devolved government executive would normally be needed to pay wage increases, and this is being cynically used by the London Conservative government that has spied an opportunity to simply sit on the money, depriving NI public sector workers of the wage increases enjoyed by workers in other parts of the UK.

The DUP is refusing to allow a new power-sharing government because it objects to post-Brexit agreements that effectively integrate the NI economy with that of the Irish Republic.

But this objection is a smokescreen for something much bigger. A new power-sharing administration would be one run by Sinn Féin.

This would be a major defeat for Six County Unionism and an omen of bigger defeats for Unionism on the horizon.

Pay differentials with the rest of the UK are becoming very pronounced. One example: a newly qualified teacher in Scotland earns £32,000, while a new teacher in Northern Ireland earns £24,000. Given the cost of living crisis, this is an absurd situation. Official figures show that between April 2022 and April 2023, public sector pay, adjusted for inflation, fell by an astonishing 7.7%. [1]

This major display of trade union strength comes after the revelation that dozens of local councils in England are nearing declaring themselves bankrupt under Section 144 of the 1988 Local Government Act. Section 144 declarations effectively hand over financial control to the government, which can then dictate cuts, redundancies, privatisation, and service closures. There have been seven recent Section 144 declarations, three of them by Birmingham, which has announced 600 redundancies. Birmingham, the largest local authority in Europe, had been caught by a historic equal pay judgement in which its own failures on equal pay are coming back to bite it. Other factors have included declining government support at a time of rising demand, the product of an ageing population, and sharply increased levels of poverty.

In an election year, the biggest local government union, Unison, closely aligned with the Kier Starmer Labour leadership, is unlikely to want to sanction local government or NHS strikes. As far as the Tory leadership is concerned, a 2024 general election based on slamming public sector strikes while Rishi Sunak wraps himself in the Union Jack of growing militarism (thanks to Putin and Netanyahu) would not be unwelcome.

This is an attempted re-run of 1983, when Margaret Thatcher won an unexpected victory based on her Falklands War victory. But the circumstances are different. In 1993, Thatcher was not burdened by 13 years of austerity nor by a massive anti-war movement such as exists today in the many hundreds of thousands who have taken to the streets in solidarity with Palestine.

Labour may suffer from the refusal of many Muslim voters to vote Labour again, given its appalling position on the Gaza crisis.

The winding down of several major 2022-23 pay settlements does not resolve the 2023-4 claims that must now be dealt with in health, local government, and education. Watch this space.

Phil Hearse

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 25 Jan 2024:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/historic-public-sector-strike-in-ni-as-a-uk-local-government-crisis-looms/>