



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on June 30, 2011

Union Protests Underway in United Kingdom

Mark Serwotka, leader of the Public and Commercial Services Union, warned of the strike, "On Thursday we will see hundreds of thousands of civil and public servants on strike. We fully expect to be joined by millions more in the autumn."

The Blaze reported:

The first test comes Thursday, when 750,000 public-sector workers — from teachers to driving examiners to customs officials — walk out for the day, part of a growing wave of opposition to the Conservative-led government's deficit-cutting regime of tax hikes, benefit curbs and spending cuts.



The United Kingdom Border Agency issued traveler warnings in anticipation that British ports and airports will likely face delays when passport officers walk out, asserting that "passengers who can do so may wish to travel on other dates." The border agency assured, however, that there will be no additional risk to Britain's security.

Despite expectations of massive inconvenience, the *Wall Street Journal* [reports](#) that the strikes have thus far been "muted compared to the mass and often violent protests in European countries such as Greece and Spain."

In England, one-third of the schools are partially shut while one-third are closed. In Wales, more than half of the schools are closed or partially closed, while all schools in Scotland remained opened.

Airports have been largely unaffected by the walkout of Border Agency staff, and a spokeswoman for Heathrow Airport in England says they are "not experiencing significant impacts."

According to UK unions, the strike is only the beginning of wholesale labor action that has been unprecedented for the past three decades.

The protests are in response to proposals made by the UK government in response to the growing economic crisis. According to the *Blaze*:

The government insists everyone must share the pain as it cuts 80 billion pounds (\$130 billion) from public spending to reduce the huge deficit, swollen after Britain spent billions bailing out foundering banks. It is cutting civil service jobs and benefits, raising the state pension age from 65 to 66, hiking the amount public sector employees contribute to pensions and reducing the payouts they get on retirement.

The government asserts that while the measures may be tough, they are fair, and hopes that the public will blame the unions for any inconvenience posed by the strikes.

Education Secretary Michael Gove explains, "The public have a very low tolerance for anything that



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disrupts their hardworking lifestyles.” He contends that the strike will damage “the respect in which teachers should be held.”

Former Labour Cabinet Minister Lord Hutton — publisher of public union pension reports — contends that it is increasing life expectancy that is virtually making the cost of providing the pensions unaffordable and that final salary schemes are inherently unfair. The *Guardian* reports:

The average public sector average pension is about £7,800 per year, while the median payment is about £5,600. In 2009-10, the average public sector pension payments were: local government worker £4,052; NHS worker £7,234; civil servant £6,199; teacher £9,806; and member of the armed forces £7,722.

A report by PricewaterhouseCoopers said that private-sector workers would need to put 37 percent of their salary into their pension to match the retirement income paid to a public-sector worker on a similar wage. The *Telegraph* notes, “Even public sector workers on modest final salary schemes might be surprised to learn how much they would need to save if they were in the private sector.”

In 2008, the *Telegraph* reported that the average private pension pot has a value of around £25,000. The *Telegraph* reported last June:

To get the average civil service pension of £5,928 a year you would need a pension pot of £189,151. The average NHS pension of £6,931 is equivalent to a pension pot of £221,155 and the average teachers’ pension of £9,358 is equivalent to a pot of £298,596, according to Hargreaves Lansdown, financial adviser.

There is a very clear discrepancy between the pensions paid in the private sector and those in the public sector.

Still, many have sympathy for the union members in the United Kingdom. Bertie Miller, an advertising executive dropping off his daughter at a London primary school, said, “I think this ‘all in it together’ is a nonsense line. We’re patently not all in it together. Start with the bankers. Start at the top, and then take it out of teachers’ pensions if we need to.”

But Labour Party leader Ed Milliband — a noted ally of the union movement — advises against the strikes, calling them a “mistake” and “a sign of failure on both sides.”

Craig Phelan, professor of modern history at Kingston University, asserts that attitudes towards unions in the UK have changed over the years.

When people think of unions now, he explains, they think of London subway drivers “holding a city hostage for what seem like insignificant demands.”

He adds, “People see unions as something other, someone who wants to take their money, someone who wants to inconvenience them, someone who doesn’t want to work as hard as they do.”

In the meantime, the unions and the government are still in the midst of negotiations. They met on Monday and have several meetings planned for next month.

Also, unions have teamed up with some anti-capitalist and anti-cuts movements that have sprung up in the UK over the course of the last year.

UK Uncut, a group known for its sit-ins at banks and companies they accuse of dodging taxes, engaged in talks with union leaders and have talked about joining in the strike on Thursday.



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The Blaze notes this may prove to be detrimental for the union strike:

It's a potentially risky strategy for the unions. A huge union demonstration drew more than 250,000 people in London on March 26, the largest protest for almost a decade — but media coverage focused on a handful of self-described anarchists who smashed shop windows, spray-painted graffiti and pelted police with bottles.

Phelan contends that while union reputations have transformed in the UK, they could be poised for a revival: "It's difficult to say, but you can see signs."

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