



## [Reflecting on the #N30 Strike](#) (Dec 2011)

by [Mark Iddon](#)

On November 30th the TUC organised a strike for the public sector Unions where estimates say that 2 million people abstained from work that day with many taking part in demonstrations in major cities throughout the UK. At the end of Wednesday, the Unions said that the day had been a success because of the number of people who had abstained from work that day. David Cameron said that the action had been a 'damp squib' because the anticipated disruption had failed to materialise and the event passed peacefully without any rioting or skirmishes with the police.

The next day's news was preoccupied with Jeremy Clarkson' suggestion that the protestors should be 'shot in front of their families' which the Prime Minister brushed off as silly, but the outraged General Secretary of Unison stated that they would be taking legal advice. Presumably, they will claim that his words were an incitement to the ethnic cleansing of

protestors.

This action occurred after 3 years of economic downturn following a banking crisis in 2008 which saw the collapse of the Lemman Brothers in the USA and the nationalisation of some of the major banks in the UK. Since then many businesses have folded or downsized their organisation to avoid going under with redundancies, pay freezes and downgrading of jobs. A new coalition Government in May 2010 enabled a new government to carry out its 'small government' policies and bring in changes to sort the debt laden economy and justify an era of austerity cuts in public sector spending. The cutbacks are to be implemented over the next 4 years and we are still in the first stages.



There is therefore much anger and frustration that people's incomes and prospects have been reduced or frozen whilst inflation has increased largely due to rising energy costs. Many people in the non unionised private sector have had their careers derailed or have accepted minimum redundancy compensation packages. Some have either found alternative jobs to the career in which they trained or have experience, or signed on for Job seekers allowance for 6 months. There is no real collective resistance for many individuals who have moved on in quiet resignation to the pointlessness of protest. Of course there are exceptions to the above, as some business's have improved, many have started their own business and many are hanging on for the time being.

Last week's strike was for public sector workers to protect their pensions which are under threat as the Government intends to change the index to which their pensions are related and increasing the age of retirement. This is on top of pay freezes or below inflation increases which have already been imposed. Whilst I would support the right of people to withdraw their labour

in order to protect and increase their pay and conditions, the issues raised by the Unions are restrained and lacking in ambition given the cutbacks and redundancies that have already been made. The Unions tried to make comparisons with the 1926 General Strike because of the numbers of people involved but the passion and ambition for real change were quite absent as if the cuts are inevitable and the only hope is to try and get a better compromised deal between the Unions and the Government.

During the week before the strike, the Government appeared to be quite anxious about the day being turned into a mass display of public anger and spent some time with the media trying to demonise the selfish workers. They suggested that the strike would harm the already fragile economy possibly to the tune of £500 million, and exaggerated the chaos that may occur across the country. They said that school closures which would result in parents having to take time off work to look after the children. Also that the airports and border controls which would lead to massive queues or, even worse, illegal immigrants entering the country without restrictions. Details of the salary and pension arrangements of the main Union leaders were disclosed in the Sunday newspapers in order to suggest hypocrisy, highlight double standards and to encourage resentment to the supposed enemies of UK business.

In the end, although some business may have suffered poor performance on the day, the stock markets survived and even seemed buoyant on the day. The FTSE actually came to more harm the next day because of the Governor of the Bank of England, Mervyn King's pronouncement on the state of the economy and his revealing that he was taking extra contingency arrangements to guard against further damage the economy.

The nervous display by the government preceding the strike was actually quite telling, and you would wonder why the Unions did not exploit this to greater extent. David Cameron even tried opportunistically to suggest the public sector was just greedy and that they had good pension arrangements in place. He desperately requested that Unions call off the strikes until negotiations could be completed, and even suggested that the Unions were greedy, as if he was trying to cash in on the public hostility to the greedy bankers as supposed by the Occupy protestors.

The November 30th strike makes clear that the Unions have no vision of a better way of organising society so that we can all have a prosperous future. Demands for growth and investment in a dynamic and productive economy were not on the agenda. And so the day of action, that some had waited for since the last damp squib in May, was a call for Pension agreements, and their associated indexes, be protected. Indeed, as has been noted elsewhere,

it was more of a therapeutic gesture to get a bit of frustration out in the open than a call for regime change. The strike seems to have strained the divide between the public and private sector as a consequence of individuals claiming for justification of scarce resources. However, there does appear to be a consensus that there is no alternative to further cuts over the next few years if we are to avoid our economy going the way of Ireland, Greece, Spain and Italy.

Perhaps the vulnerability and lack of ideas exposed by those presently (mis)managing the country would allow an opportunity to call for change, for a better way of organising society by those who hold humanity in higher esteem. We must first understand that society deserves better and humanity has the creativity and resourcefulness to be capable of achieving a more prosperous future.

### **Some background readings**

[It's Not the 1980s in Britain anymore](#) , James Heartfield New Georgraphy 04 December 2011