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Rights under attack as unscrupulous bosses get a boost

Unions, lawyers and rights groups have condemned a renewed government attack on workers' rights through the reintroduction of employment tribunal fees. Workers will have to pay to make claims such as unfair dismissal and discrimination at the hands of unscrupulous employers.

Nearly 50 organisations including the TUC, Citizens Advice, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Fawcett Society, Maternity Action, Women's Budget Group and Liberty have called on the government to think again. The groups opposing the fees said in a joint statement: "Workers seeking recovery of wage theft, unpaid redundancy pay and compensation for unfair dismissal are to be asked to stump up extra money at an incredibly tough moment in their lives.

"Access to justice must never be contingent on your ability to pay."



TUC general secretary Paul Nowak (pictured) said: "All working people should be able to enforce their rights. But introducing fees for tribunals puts yet another hurdle in the way of those seeking justice at their most vulnerable moment."

It is the government's second attempt to force workers to pay for justice. In 2017 public-sector union Unison challenged the introduction of fees, winning a Supreme Court ruling that imposing a fee "effectively prevents access to justice and is therefore unlawful."

Mr Nowak added: "The Conservatives have already tried this and failed.

"Last time they introduced tribunal fees, claims dropped by two-thirds. And the Supreme Court threw fees out — saying they interfered with access to justice. That should have

been the nail in the coffin for these cynical plans, but ministers have decided to side with bad bosses over workers and resurrect employment tribunal fees.”

The fees will particularly affect women sacked or victimised at work for becoming pregnant. Rosalind Bragg, Maternity Action Group director, said: “For pregnant women and new mothers in the cost-of-living crisis, every penny counts. We have laws in place to secure equal treatment of pregnant women and new mothers at work but these are ineffective without the robust operation of the employment tribunal. Fees are a step backwards in the fight for gender equality.”

Industrial tribunals, later renamed employment tribunals, were introduced by former Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s Labour government in 1964.

Pete Lazenby NUJ: <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/unions-lawyers-and-rights-groups-slam-ministers-decision-reintroduce>

NHS

The tenth round of junior doctor strike action in England took place from Saturday 24 February until midnight on Wednesday 28 February. They are also being re-balloted until 20 March to extend the mandate for industrial action, and provide the **BMA** with a further mandate.

The **BMA** stated that progress was being made in talks but the Government failed to meet the deadline of 8 February to present a credible offer. In order to allow more time for negotiations to continue, they extended an offer to the Health Secretary to cancel this round of strikes before it was announced publicly if she agreed to extend the mandate for strike action for four weeks. Unfortunately she declined to do so leaving them no choice but to announce the recent strike. More about consultants’ action and a UK news round-up go to: <https://www.bma.org.uk/> Also at: <https://www.nhsconfed.org/medical-and-dental-staff-industrial-action-2023-2024-updated-23rd-february-2024>

An online referendum for SAS (Specialty and Specialist) doctors in England to accept or reject an offer from Government closed at 5.00pm on Wednesday 28 February.

Action in Teesside and North Devon

UNISON reports that healthcare staffs have backed strike action in support of their pay claim. Hundreds of healthcare assistants at North Tees & Hartlepool NHS Foundation Trust and South Tees Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust have voted for strike action. Healthcare assistants at seven sites across the two trusts are set to walk out unless hospital managers improve an offer on back pay. Across the two trusts, 96% of staff backed strike action.

According to NHS guidance, healthcare assistants on salary band 2 of the Agenda for Change pay scale should only be providing personal care, such as bathing and feeding patients. However, most of the healthcare assistants have routinely undertaken clinical tasks, such as taking blood, performing electrocardiogram tests and inserting cannulas, says UNISON. More at: <https://northern.unison.org.uk/news/article/2024/02/teesside-healthcare-staff-back-strike-action-in-pay-row-says-unison/>

Meanwhile hundreds of the lowest-paid workers at North Devon District Hospital are to take three more days of strike action after being denied a pay rise worth at least £1,655, says **UNISON**. The health staff, working for the private contractor Sodexo, will walk out on 6, 8 and 11 March. They say they should be treated fairly and given the same money as colleagues directly employed by the NHS. More at:

<https://southwest.unison.org.uk/news/2024/02/north-devon-healthcare-workers-set-three-more-strike-dates/>

Unite roundup

Safety critical workers responsible for maintaining and preparing trains across the East Midlands are to begin strike action next month after their employer failed to make any form of a pay offer, **Unite** has announced. Around 70 **Unite** members at Alstom Engineering based in **Derby** are taking strike action on four days beginning on Wednesday 6 March. The workers are responsible for service and preparation of trains and carriages, fault finding and logging of incidents online and general problems with the fleet for East Midlands Rail. The industrial action is likely to create a shortage of available rolling stock. More at: <https://www.unitetheunion.org/news-events/news/2024/february/vital-derby-rail-maintenance-workers-to-strike-over-failure-to-make-pay-offer>

Unite has also announced that bus company staff in **London** are to escalate strike action next month after their employer failed to make an improved pay offer,. Around 40 staff who work in the control rooms for Abellio buses (to be known as Transport UK from 2 March) and who control the bus routes, instruct drivers on traffic jams or accidents and ensure overall safety on the routes, are to take a further 9 days of action beginning on 7 March.

In other news **Unite** secured Stand Scotland and Newcastle comedy club workers **19% pay rises**; secured West Midlands Metro tram drivers a **13.5% pay rise** and achieved a **12.8 per cent pay rise** for around 500 National Express Ring and Ride workers across the West Midlands. The one year pay deal, backdated from 1 January 2024, was secured without industrial action.

RMT and TSSA

RMT and TSSA have criticised the Government's draft Rail Reform Bill, which will create a "commercially focused" Great British Railways (GBR).

RMT general secretary Mick Lynch said: "This Bill, in its current form, will do nothing to address the 30-year-long decline in our railways since privatisation.

"We will continue to protect our members' jobs, terms and conditions while campaigning for a fully integrated publicly owned railway that works in the interests of all passengers." <https://www.rmt.org.uk/news/rmt-responds-to-rail-reform-bill20224/>.

TSSA general secretary Maryam Eslamdoust added: "The draft Rail Reform Bill is completely inadequate. "It does not address the damage that privatisation has done to our railways and infrastructure. The only way to sort out the mess unleashed by the

Tories botched privatisation of our railways is public ownership, full stop. Thankfully, Labour is now committed to this, which can't come soon enough."

<https://www.tssa.org.uk/news-and-events/tssa-news/tssa-condemns-draft-rail-reform-bill>

The Department for Transport said that GBR will "leverage private-sector innovation" while having responsibility for infrastructure, operations and oversight of whole industry finance where it is the franchising authority.

Meanwhile at 1.00pm on 28 February, the **RMT** held a Parliamentary Rally and lobby of MPs as part of their '**Rail Cuts Cost Lives**' campaign. They are calling on the UK Government to ensure our railway has the funding it needs to run safely and effectively.

PCS

PCS members working for the seven museums and galleries that make up National Museums Liverpool started strike action on Saturday 17 February in their dispute with the employer of its refusal to pay staff a £1500 cost-of-living payment. The strike is planned to continue until 14 April.

Meanwhile **PCS** General Secretary Fran Heathcote has given the Cabinet Office a 5 March deadline to give guarantees on the national campaign demands or enter into a trade dispute.

In a letter sent to Alex Chisholm, UK Civil Service CEO, on 19 February, Fran warned that **PCS** will not hesitate to take action should he fail to agree demands on pay, pensions and job security.

Fran said: "Strike action last year resulted in significant pay rises for our members. We told ministers we would ballot our members again if a decent rise wasn't forthcoming this year. The government must decide whether it wants to risk more national strikes or whether to make us an offer we can accept." More at: <https://www.pcs.org.uk/news-events/news/make-us-offer-we-can-accept-pcs-tells-government>

Westminster security guards have won their long-running dispute in the House of Commons after bosses scrapped controversial plans to introduce a new shift pattern. More than 250 PCS members in the autumn voted to take strike action after being told to work extra night shifts to cover for a lack of staff. The strikes were suspended for talks with the employer, which have now concluded with the new shifts being changed. More at: <https://www.pcs.org.uk/news-events/news/big-win-house-commons-security-members>

PCS reports that four hundred workers at The Pensions Regulator have announced a new 12-day strike as part of a dispute over pay. The staff walked out on 28 and 29 February 2023 and on 1, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19 March. They have already taken more than ten weeks' of industrial action over pay. **PCS** says the action has caused backlogs and affected future planning at the Brighton-based body.

PCS joined trade unionists from across the movement at an event to discuss the rise of the far-right and ways of fighting it. The meeting on 20 February at TUC headquarters heard how the last decade has witnessed a resurgence of the far-right across the globe.

PCS general secretary Fran Heathcote, the first speaker, said that the far-right in the UK has been “emboldened” by politicians like Rishi Sunak and Suella Braverman through their “hateful and incendiary language”.

More at: <https://www.pcs.org.uk/news-events/news/we-must-fight-far-right-warns-pcs-leader-tuc-meeting>

Education

Members of **NASUWT-The Teachers' Union** at Chetham's School of Music in Manchester have started five planned days of strike action over attempts to make teachers choose between their pension or their pay. Chethams, which is the UK's largest specialist music school, is attempting to remove staff from the Teachers' Pension Scheme (TPS) and enrol them in an inferior Defined Contribution scheme. If teachers choose to remain in the TPS they must accept a reduced salary. More at: <https://www.nasuwat.org.uk/article-listing/chetham-school-strike-attempts-downgrade-pensions.html>

UCU members at Northumbria University have declared an industrial dispute over the refusal of senior management to rule out compulsory redundancies as part of a planned £12.5 million reduction in 'staff costs.'

Earlier, Vice Chancellor Andy Long wrote to staff telling them that cuts would be necessary 'in order to ensure we are able to meet our shared strategic ambitions and remain competitive in an increasingly challenging sector.'

After overwhelmingly declaring a dispute at an all-member meeting, the UCU branch said staff shouldn't have to suffer for the mistakes of senior management. They added that industrial action is inevitable unless management backs down and negotiates seriously.

The university has indicated that they will push through huge reductions in spending on staff, and have failed to rule out compulsory redundancies, even while insisting that the institution's 'underlying financial position remains very strong.' More at:

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/13471/Northumbria-UCU-declares-dispute-over-failure-to-rule-out-compulsory-redundancies>

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