

Colleagues, comrades, sisters and brothers.

Greetings on behalf of UNISON.

And our tens of thousands of council and school support members in the North West who are taking strike action today against low pay.

Against the insulting 1% offer from our national employers. Yet another real term pay cut in an endless line of pay cuts.

Solidarity greetings to our sister public service unions also on strike today : GMB, Unite, NUT, PCS and FBU.

And greetings to those of you here today and not on strike; who have come along to show support and solidarity. It really is appreciated.

Our struggle today is your struggle as well. The struggle of millions of ordinary working people – public sector *and* private sector – who are seeing their wages cut, their conditions cut, and their jobs cut on the false altar of austerity.

In the run up to this action we've seen the usual negative media:-

“Who do these local government and school support workers think they are?”

“Why are they taking strike action now?”

For those who don't know or who misrepresent us :

We are the classroom and nursery assistants, cooks, cleaners, youth workers, residential workers and advisors supporting younger people;

We are the social workers, carers and support workers helping our most vulnerable;

We are the housing assistants and homelessness officers;

We are the registrars, coroner's assistants and gravediggers;

We are the planners, engineers and architects shaping the built environment;

We are the refuse collectors, street cleaners, road workers and park wardens looking after it;

We are the library staff, leisure attendants and museum guides;

We are the building control officers, environmental health officers, school crossing patrols and emergency response teams in public safety and protection;

We are the welfare advisors dealing with the fallout from this government dismantling public services and our welfare system;

We are the admin and clerical workers, HR, legal, accountancy and IT staff keeping it all turning;

We are the 600 different job types in local government and school support providing cradle to grave services - 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

Often unseen. But increasingly doing far, far more work to plug the growing holes. For much, much less reward.

We are also the lowest paid workers in the entire public sector.

That's who we are.

We are proud of our jobs. Proud of our public services. And we are proud of our union and our sister unions for taking a stand on low pay.

In response to our strike call, The Local Government Association said:—

“It is disappointing that UNISON will be proceeding with strike action. Local government staff have worked wonders”.

We thank the LGA for that last sentiment. But we ask them a question of our own:

“If you value local government staff so much; then why have you followed a pay policy that has created the biggest sustained fall in living standards for any sector of workers in over a hundred years?”

It was 2008 when a local government pay award last matched inflation. We had a 3 year total pay freeze, starting a year before it even became widely fashionable!

Our terms and conditions have been attacked : car allowances cut, overtime rates cut, unsociable hours payments cut, annual leave cut, sickness pay cut, maternity pay cut.

In the last 4 years alone the real value of our pay and pensions has plummeted by a staggering 20%!

At the same time a quarter of council staff are working a day each week on top of their normal hours without any payment at all.

So in 2014 we are working 5 days to earn the equivalent of what we were paid for 3 days in 2010.

And it will only get worse:-

Government Ministers announced last weekend the pay restraint policy is set to continue until at least 2018.

The Treasury Inflation Forecasts to 2018 predict a 16.2% cumulative rise in the cost of living. Under government pay policy our wages will only go up by 5.1% in the same period.

So by 2018 local government and school support workers will have lost nearly a THIRD of their pay and pension value in real terms.

UNISON's own surveys suggest around 40% of all council and school support workers rely on in-work benefits just to make ends meet.

An incredible figure on the surface ; but not that surprising when you learn that a third earn beneath the Living Wage rate, and two-thirds earn less than the Government's own definition of low pay.

61% can only get part time hours. 91% of these are women. When all the research shows it is low paid women in work who suffer disproportionately from the impact of cuts to public services.

In-work benefits are paid for out of public monies. Why are Treasury and CLG Ministers happy to use public monies in this way, rather than paying the self-same money as wages instead of in-work benefits? It doesn't make sense!

The NJC pay claim is for the Living Wage as a minimum pay level, with the same flat rate increase for all. That's a rise of just £1.20 an hour.

Half the cost of implementing the claim is immediately self-funding for the economy; through increased tax and National Insurance, and reduced benefit payments.

Over 80% of council and school workers live in or next to the authority we work for. Over 50p in every £1 of wages we earn is then spent directly in our local economy. Keeping local businesses going. Helping to employ other workers.

Don't be fooled that there's no money in the coffers.

It isn't true.

Just as it wasn't true when the government said "we are all in this together".

Just as it's too easy to blame everything on the Banker Bogeymen and leave it at that. We need to understand and counter the ideological responses and political choices that were made.

Because that's what laid the ground for pay freezes.

£375 billion of new currency was created to shore up the banking sector in the wake of the 2008 crash. The Bank of England reported that by May 2012 Quantative Easing had generated just over £600 billion of new household wealth. Presenting its report the Bank stated that;

"In practice the benefits from these wealth effects will accrue to those households holding the most financial assets."

In short; the already-rich got richer, and the less well off got nothing.

95% of all this new wealth went to the richest 5% of households. And the poorest 50% of households got ... precisely nothing. Yes, colleagues – that's our households.

But in fact it was worse than nothing. The rich locked in and locked up their newly increased riches. And that kindled another consequence - real term pay cuts for the vast majority.

And it goes on ...

Over the last 12 months the disposable income of the highest earning 20% of households rose by an average of nearly £1,000.

For every other household it fell. Again, colleagues – that's our households.

A crisis of capital and its underlying system has consciously and systematically been transferred by the few onto the many.

Public value and community assets are privatised to keep the corporate snouts in the trough : But corporate debt is nationalised to become a millstone further grinding down the ordinary people.

The UK is the 7th richest economy on the planet. And the most unequal country in the western world when it comes to wealth distribution.

Cutting the upper income tax rate is losing the Treasury £678 million a year; reduced Corporation Tax is losing it £5 billion a year.

Tax avoidance, evasion and offshoring is costing an estimated £130 billion.

Yet £1 billion would give a 5% pay rise for every local government and school support worker in the country.

It's Political choices : Not affordability.

The money is there, colleagues. It's just in the wrong places.

Even within the sector itself there is still the money for fair pay.

Local authority reserves in April 2013 stood at some £19 billion. They have gone up by more than £2 billion nationally. In the North West, reserves increased between 2010 and 2013 by some £579 million.

Statistics and details only paint part of the picture.

UNISON's own Welfare Charity, "There For You", has seen a massive rise in requests for assistance over the last 12 months.

It is also supporting the families of members where increased pressure of work and personal debt due to poverty wages led them to take their own lives.

That is a personal and family tragedy. And a collective tragedy that all UNISON members feel.

But it's also an absolute disgrace.

The finger of responsibility points firmly towards our national employers and this government. And I make no apologies for judging them today.

And I say they have failed.

They have failed me; they have failed you; they have failed our families; and they have failed our communities.

To the government I say this : If you want to talk about 'making work pay' then start by making it pay for your own employees - our public sector workers - through a Living Wage, a fair pay rise for all, and an end to in-work poverty.

To the Labour opposition I say this : Voter concern over low pay and fair wages is at the highest level IPSOS/MORI have ever recorded. So remember who your core voters are when you nail your colours to this mast; and before you come knocking at our doors for help next spring.

To the Local Government Association I say this : Thanks for your crocodile-tear sentiments. But no thanks. A pat on the head doesn't pay our bills and feed our families.

To local councillors I say this : Our struggle as workers is part of your struggle for a local government that matters and can make a difference : For accountable local democracy and civic governance : For an end to this anti-democratic and ideological austerity agenda that is dismantling our public services, rendering local politics redundant and plunging millions of dedicated workers into poverty and despair.

So I call on our local councillors to do what they know is right : To put pressure on their own local authority, for it to put pressure on the national employers - and on central government if necessary - to give a fair pay rise to local government and school support workers.

We are long overdue one. We know one is affordable. Our national employers know one is affordable. The Government knows one is affordable.

And we will do what we have to, to get one.

That is why local government and school support workers are striking today.

UNISON stands ready to negotiate openly. But if the national employers refuse to engage with honesty and fairness - **then we will strike again.**

We do not take industrial action lightly. It is the last resort not the opening gambit.

The same is true for all public service workers on strike today – be they members of UNISON, or GMB, or Unite, or NUT, or PCS, or FBU.

We don't come into the job expecting to build a fortune. But neither do we expect to be taken for granted; to be taken for a ride by our national employer's organisation.

It is unfortunate that the last resort of industrial action has become a necessity today.

But ENOUGH : IS ENOUGH : IS ENOUGH!!!

Colleagues : Thanks for your time. Thanks for your support.