

'How Will I Feed My Son?': British Government Workers Fighting Back Against Poverty Pay

By [Nathan Akehurst](#)

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In the heart of one of the world's oldest and richest democracies, the staff keeping government offices functional are forced to turn to food banks because they cannot afford to eat.

Cleaners at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) in London are unable to afford the bus to work. One worker was unable to give their wife transport money to take their sick son to the GP, forcing her to walk for ninety minutes; others have faced eviction over late rent.

"How can we live like this?"

"How will I feed my son?" asks one worker. "I have worked here 10 years and it has never been this bad. Some of my colleagues have been paid zero. Some have been paid only 40 hours when they worked 120 hours. One colleague is missing thousands of pounds and can't travel to work. They promise they will pay and it keeps going and going. How can we live like this?"

This is not the first so-called payroll issue at International Service Systems (ISS), a huge facility service company for numerous multinationals and the government. The Communication Workers Union sounded alarms in February over ISS' planned move from monthly to fortnightly pay, meaning housekeepers would have to wait a month to receive two weeks' money, along with a pay review date which could mean no 2019 pay award at all for those transferring into the company. In April, three unions began separate protests as the scale of the problem became clearer; security guards at Barclay and Goldman Sachs and porters and caterers at NHS hospitals faced being left without pay as the system was 'upgraded'. The problem has now rolled into the heart of government.

The new contracts with ISS state that workers will be paid every fortnight. However, this pay will not be for the fortnight just worked, but for the previous one. In practice, ISS withholds two weeks' pay from the first month of work – because in this month workers are only paid for two weeks' work. ISS offered bridging loans, but these are not enough: once they have been paid back (over four pay cycles – eight weeks) the workers are once again left with two weeks' less pay than they are due. It also means that workers must repay the loan over a short period of time, reducing their take-home pay by up to £250 every fortnight.

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These are workers with little or no disposable income. "They work 60 hour weeks and still

barely have anything”, says a union source inside BEIS. This month the cleaners – mostly Latin American and North African migrant workers – have been on strike, most of them, for the first time. They are calling for a living wage. When the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union organised the food banks, BEIS staff were supportive and gave generously, with many joining the union as well – although “no one from senior management donated”, the source says. “It’s now about moving from charity to solidarity, getting people to donate to the strike fund.”

“Media attention and outrage from civil servants in the department helped bring [management] to the table,” the source explains, “They’re holding out on paying a living wage, because as the department that sets the minimum they don’t want to admit that their policy is a failure. They’ve told us as much.”

Organisers’ next steps are to increase pressure on ISS and BEIS, and security staff are being balloted to join the strike. Management have offered an increase below the unions’ terms which they believe shows that opposition “is on purely ideological grounds.” Management have now agreed to meet workers, although the chaos engulfing government with Theresa May’s resignation poses strategic problems for the union.

In the time since outsourcing giant [Carillion’s collapse](#), which cost thousands of jobs, even more outsourcing scandals have hit Whitehall. Cleaners at the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) – as well as Kensington & Chelsea Council (RBKC) – picketed in August last year against outsourcing giants Amey and OCS’ refusal to pay them the London living wage. In those cases both the MoJ and RBKC blamed the outsourcers, which is of course technically correct but disguises the structural reason outsourcers are hired; precisely so messy functions like industrial relations and responsibility for decent pay and conditions are farmed out to outsourcers. It is not merely services that are privatised; passing blame from the publicly accountable authority to the unaccountable corporate entity is part of the institutional arrangement. In this case, BEIS did not discuss the issuing of the contract with the PCS staff union, who learned after the contract had been signed that it did not include proper living wage provisions. PCS had a relevant recognition agreement – but ISS unilaterally stopped recognising the union just before problems began in earnest.

“The workers were powerless. Now they’re not.”

Organisations like ISS, which is currently planning to cut its workforce by 100,000, are concerned only with the bottom line. At the state’s end of the equation, the austerity drive to reduce ‘government waste’ and ‘red tape’ causes giants like Carillion to not merely cut corners, but offer costings that are out-rightly misleading and institutionalise an unsustainable business model. It’s not just a matter of an unscrupulous employer causing an incident that happens to, on this occasion, involve the civil service. It’s a consequence of a realignment of the relationship between market and state and the torpedoing of not only public services but public service delivery, in which the austerity regime has been only an instrument in pursuit of a broader plan to remake the economy in the interests of the few.

But on this occasion, the outsourcers may have pushed their workers too far. The ISS payroll dispute has contingently affected hugely disparate sections of organised labour. Large ‘conventional’ unions like Unite and the GMB union, middleweight and more militant unions such as the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union and PCS and small, flexible left unions like Independent Workers of Great Britain and United Voices of the World are all involved. It’s an

important opportunity for collaboration between organisers working among marginal contract workers and the traditional heavily-unionised ranks of the public sector. “[The workers] were genuinely powerless and now realise they’re not”, says the BEIS source, who also praised the energy brought to the picket line, with music and attempts at making it a communal experience. He adds that Whatsapp groups have enabled lines of communication between workers that are being moved around rapidly. This includes rebutting disinformation, such as one incident when a manager claimed that if more than seven workers joined a picket line they would incur legal action.

The BEIS workers understand what is happening in a broad sense.

“If they can do this inside a government department imagine what they can do outside government. I hope the minister can see this and be ashamed at what he is putting [us] through”, says one worker.

They have linked their missing payslips, their low pay and their intimidating management to the broader issue of outsourcing and are calling for BEIS to bring them back in house. If it is significant that this situation is taking place in the heart of our political institutions, it is equally significant that popular resistance is growing there too.

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