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Why we must oppose minimum service levels

Ahead of the TUC's special Congress (9 December) on the government's anti-trade union restrictions, Pete blogs about opposing minimum service levels and the effectiveness of recent strike action by the Border Force.

Our members in the Border Force have recently proven how effective strike action can be.

As part of our national campaign, it was a significant piece of work to get the industrial action ballot over the 50% anti-union threshold. However, our members were so angered by the pay awards they had received in previous years that we not only met but well exceeded the threshold.

In 2021-22, our members in Border Force received no pay rise. In 2022-23, our most experienced staff working at the border received a consolidated pay rise of £259 a year.

Amidst a devastating cost of living crisis, this equated to a take home pay-rise of less than £4 per week. But after we took targeted, sustained action at airports and maritime ports, our members received a pay rise of at least 5%, with lowest paid members receiving over 10%. All members also received a one-off cost-of-living payment of £1,500.

We have no doubt that the shift to this much-improved pay deal came about as a result of our members taking industrial action.

Sections of the media and the government would have you believe our industrial action had no effect whatsoever, with some newspapers reporting that the ports

flowed better when our members weren't there.

Yet this is a strange argument. If they can manage so well without us, then why have the government introduced legislation to ensure that our members are on the controls?

Fundamental human right

The minimum service levels legislation is a direct attack on our members' fundamental human right to withdraw their labour when the employer is not willing to listen to the trade unions who represent our members.

Our members were badged as key workers during the pandemic and told that they must attend work, putting themselves at risk throughout the pandemic: 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The reward for doing this was a 0% pay rise followed by £4 extra per week.

Because of industrial action in 2023, our members got a reasonable – yet far from perfect – pay rise. But the industrial action we took wasn't just about pay. It was also about the arbitrary cut in civil servants across the board, amounting to 91,000 job losses, in addition to the proposed cut of our redundancy compensation by approximately by one-third.

Similarly, we remain in dispute regarding the level of our pension contributions. And now these minimum service levels laws will limit the impact of any industrial action taken, restricting our hardworking and dedicated members from fighting for their rights.