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Briefing

The check-off system for union fees

There has been little media coverage about the abrupt withdrawal of the check-off system for collecting union subscriptions, which will be pushed through various civil service departments in the coming months. Cabinet Office Minister, Francis Maude, declared "it is not desirable for civil service employers to provide an unnecessary service on behalf of the Trade Unions" and has signalled his intention to withdraw the mechanism. 7 government departments have already served notice to civil service union PCS to end the arrangements.

This briefing sets out what the check-off system is, why it is being withdrawn and why this raises cause for concern.

So what is check-off?

Check-off refers to the way in which union membership subscriptions are collected through salary payments in both private and public sector workplaces. Where some organisations have historically collected subscriptions outside of the payroll mechanism, others have traditionally arranged to have contributions deducted straight from a member's salary.

The check-off system is an important internationally recognised trade union right. The ability to establish a check-off arrangement can be regarded as a litmus test of an employer's commitment to a democratic workplace. The mechanism is also an important way of allowing unions to effectively represent their members by avoiding the lengthy administrative task of collecting subscriptions individually.

Read more here:

www.thompsonstradeunionlaw.co.uk/information-and-resources/check-off-arrangements-the-law.htm, www.pcs.org.uk/en/campaigns/Union-Busting-at-the-heart-of-government/index.cfm

Why change the system?

In December 2013 Frances Maude circulated a letter [<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/interactive/2014/oct/03/liberal-conservative-coalition-francismaude>] suggesting that government departments should seek to charge unions for the check-off arrangement.

The Conservatives have cited various reasons for removing the system in the civil service suggesting that the arrangement is too expensive or that it "epitomises a cosy and unhealthy relationship between the unions and the state" [<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/eric-pickles-costs-taxpayers-90000-2248197>].

However, PCS, the main union affected, has offered to pay the very small amount for maintaining check-off (estimated to be about £350 per annum). Even senior Coalition partners have suggested check-off costs very little to run [<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jan/19/pcs-funding-fears-government-plans-withdrawal-direct-payment-hmrc>] with Liberal Democrat Minister Danny Alexander stating that there was "no fiscal case" for the changes in a letter to various departments.

More information: www.classonline.org.uk

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Incidentally, cost to the public purse did not seem to be a top priority for Conservative Minister Eric Pickles in 2013 when £90,000 legal costs were incurred at the taxpayers expense when a High Court ruling found attempts to withdraw check-off at the Department for Communities and Local Government to be illegal [www.pcs.org.uk/en/news_and_events/news_centre/index.cfm/eric-pickles-costs-taxpayers-90000-in-attack-on-union].

When will it come into effect?

The check-off arrangement will be removed for civil service workers in the DWP at the end of March 2015 and for HMRC workers in April 2015.

How many members are affected?

Removing the check-off system will require employees to sign up proactively to their union, arranging their own payment methods, which is likely to cause many to drop off the books.

The changes will impact upon 153,000 workers in the civil service. This predominantly affects the PCS union and represents 66% of their entire membership.

Why does it matter?

The changes will majorly disrupt the PCS's funding stream and are widely regarded as an ideologically motivated attack to weaken union rights within the public sector ahead of further cuts.

Without urgent action from PCS representatives, the union could have collapsed, leaving employees unrepresented and vulnerable to job losses and deteriorating terms and conditions.

The removal of check-off is an extraordinary act to undermine workplace democracy and should be

regarded as a small but significant step towards shifting power further away from working people.

What action can be taken?

In our blog PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka [<http://classonline.org.uk/blog/item/resist-austerity-and-kick-out-this-union-busting-government>] urges people to circulate information about the check-off reforms and to write to their MPs.

What has Class published?

BLOG: A new blog by Mark Serwotka examines the motives driving the Cabinet Office's attempts to weaken the PCS [<http://classonline.org.uk/blog/item/resist-austerity-and-kick-out-this-union-busting-government>].

Read more:

So now Britain's a state union buster like Bahrain (www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/03/britain-state-union-buster-bahrain-francis-maude-check-off-threat-democracy) – Ellie O'Hagan finds Francis Maude's legacy is a union-busting state.

Union-busting at the heart of this government? (strongerunions.org/2015/01/16/union-busting-at-the-heart-of-this-government) - Matt Dykes contextualises the PCS check-off battle in Stronger Unions.

PCS union funding fears as government plans withdrawal of direct payment (www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jan/19/pcs-funding-fears-government-plans-withdrawal-direct-payment-hmrc) - Rajeev Syal outlines the challenge ahead of PCS in the Guardian.