

Embargo 00.01 Sunday 30th March 2014

Probation Staff & Solicitors Take Strike Action

At 12 noon on 31st March thousands of Probation staff across England and Wales will walk out on strike and stay out until 12 midnight on 1st April.

Napo, the Trade Union for Probation and Family Court staff, are still in a formal dispute over the government plans to privatise 70% of the probation service which they say will have a significant impact on public safety and public protection. This is the union's 5th strike in its 103 year history and its second in relation to this issue.

Ian Lawrence, General Secretary said "the government plans to outsource 70% of the probation service is untried and untested. It is a dangerous social experiment that we believe will lead to a reduction in rehabilitation and fragment risk management placing the public at risk".

The union's campaign to fight these proposals has seen support from a number of other agencies such as the Howard League for Penal Reform, the Prison Reform Trust, academics and professionals across the justice sector. The Justice Alliance, representing solicitors and law firms across the country will also withdraw their labour on 31st & 1st April. They are campaigning against the government's cuts to legal aid.

Nicola Hill, President of the London Criminal Courts Solicitors Association said, "What's happening to probation and criminal legal aid belongs to the same sorry story. That's why criminal defence solicitors are standing by colleagues in probation. As the government dismantles the criminal justice system, risks are being taken which threaten public safety and the right to a fair defence. The MOJ is taking a gamble on outsourcing the supervision of the most persistent offenders on release from short-term prison sentences. Meanwhile as the Justice Secretary scrimps on legal aid, the risk of the innocent going to jail is set to become a nightmarish reality. Miscarriages of justice for ordinary people will increase because they can't get a decent lawyer."

Matt Foot Justice Alliance said "This is the first day in history when solicitors and probation have taken joint action not to work the courts. They are united against a Minister of Justice who is listening to no-one, not even government funded reports. He is obsessed with private companies and is being dangerous and foolish with justice. All but the rich will suffer - which is why we are united and determined to stop him."

There will be a joint rally held in London at Old Palace Yard, Westminster at 2pm on 1st April followed by a march to the MOJ headquarters. The event will be replicated across the country in other cities.

Ian Lawrence said "this government's attack on the justice system has already led to families being disadvantaged from cuts to civil legal aid. Now we are seeing criminal legal aid being massively reduced and the dismantling of one of the best performing public services in the country. All 35 Probation Trusts are performing to a good or very good standard. These reforms are ideologically driven and being pushed by a political timetable. If the Secretary of State really believes in these reforms then we ask him to pause and to run pilots that can be independently evaluated to evidence they work. However, he refuses to do this and is pushing them through ahead of the general election. It will cost the public in terms of both safety and taxpayers' money"

At the Public Accounts Committee earlier this month, the Ministry of Justice disclosed that so far they had spent approximately £9 million on consultants alone but have so far refused to publish the full costs of the reforms. The Justice Select Committee has also raised significant concerns about the lack of information and impact of the reforms. In the House of Lords a number of Lords have raised their concerns about the lack of parliamentary debate in relation to the biggest reforms the Probation Service has ever seen.

Ian Lawrence said "our members feel passionate about their profession and the work that they do to protect the public and rehabilitate offenders. They do not take strike action lightly and this has been a very difficult decision for them. But the public needs to know how these changes will impact on risk management and ultimately public protection. Numerous professionals, academics, Chief Officers and other organisations have spoken out against these reforms but the Secretary of State refuses to listen or debate the subject and is going ahead despite the wide range criticism of his plans."

Ends