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Starmer faces union pressure ahead of winter fuel payment vote



PM defends cutting winter fuel payments

Zoe Conway in Brighton

BBC News

André Rhoden-Paul & Hafsa Khalil

BBC News

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Leaders of two of the biggest unions have added further pressure on the government over its plan to cut winter fuel payments for millions of pensioners in England and Wales.

Unite general secretary Sharon Graham told the BBC the government should "do a U-turn", while head of the PCS union Fran Heathcote said it was a "misstep" which needed to be "put right".

Paul Nowak, head of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) which brings unions together, has also said the government should "rethink" and consider other lines of support for pensioners.

Sir Keir Starmer, who is facing a potential rebellion at a vote in the Commons on Tuesday, says the cut is necessary due to the state of the country's finances.

The change will mean more than 10 million pensioners **will no longer receive the payments of between £200 and £300 a year**, which will now only be made to those on low incomes who receive certain benefits.

Charities and many MPs are concerned about those still on a relatively small income who will miss out.

The vast majority of those eligible will only receive the payments if they have **first claimed pension credit**, a state pension top-up. It is estimated that 880,000 eligible pensioners have not claimed it.

One pensioner who will be affected by the planned cut is Marilyn, 70, from Paignton in Devon.

She told the BBC she was not entitled to pension credit because of her savings, which she keeps in case of an emergency.

"I am extremely worried, the cost of living already puts a big strain on my low income which is my state pension," she said.

Starmer facing union call to U-turn on winter fuel payment cut

Both Unite and the Public and Commercial Services Union have criticised Labour's policy at the TUC in Brighton.

Ms Graham told BBC Radio 4's Today programme the government needed to be "big enough and brave enough to do a U-turn" on plans to cut the allowance, calling for the introduction of a wealth tax to boost government finances instead.

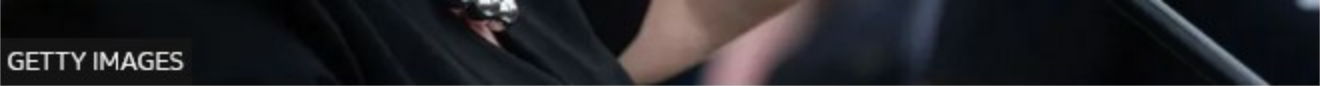
"Leadership is about making choices and knowing when you've done something wrong," she said.

Ms Heathcote, the general secretary of the PCS, told the BBC there would be "real backlash" which could take the form of industrial action if the government continued "along the line that they're heading" over welfare.

Mr Nowak, TUC general secretary, told BBC Breakfast he was "really concerned" by the impact of means testing winter fuel payments, adding that he expected the union to ask the government to "rethink" the decision.

"I hope in the Budget the chancellor will set out support available for pensioners who aren't on pension or tax credit, but who are not well off by any means, to make sure that they are not frightened to turn on the heating this winter," he said.





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Unite general secretary Sharon Graham told the BBC the the government needed to be "brave enough" to admit it had made a mistake

Speaking on **Sunday with the BBC's Laura Kuenssberg in his first major interview** in Downing Street, Sir Keir said his new government was "going to have to be unpopular" as he defended his "tough" decision to cut winter fuel payments.

He accused previous governments of avoiding confronting the cost of the winter fuel payment.

"When we talk about tough decisions, I'm talking about... the things the last government ran away from," he said.