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Ken Thomas, who has died aged 81, was head of the largest civil servants' trades union from 1976 to 1982, a period which saw some of the worst industrial strife of the 20th century.

He became General Secretary of the 225,000-strong Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA) in the midst of a power-struggle between moderates and militant Left-wing extremists. Although not himself a militant, Thomas was obliged to fight battles on two fronts: pay levels and the threat of job cuts.

In 1977 the CPSA rejected proposals for incomes restraint and called a nine-week strike of air traffic control assistants.

When, the next year, the Left took control of the CPSA's national executive, Thomas blamed this on the government's incomes policy, which had so frustrated his members. During the "Winter of Discontent" (1978-79) the CPSA took strike action over pay, seeking an award of between 20 and 35 per cent to bring their members in line with comparable workers in the private sector.

In 1980 Mrs Thatcher announced 75,000 job cuts, and the following year the union took selective strike action after being offered a seven per cent rise. The Armed Forces had received 11 per cent, and Thomas said: "Mrs Thatcher should learn that her form of patriotism is not bought on the cheap. What is good for service men and women and policemen is good enough for us."

After 21 weeks the union surrendered, its strike funds exhausted. They were awarded 7.5 per cent.

Kenneth Rowland Thomas was born at Penarth, south Wales, on February 7 1927. His father died when he was a boy, and he was brought up by his mother and two sisters. After Penarth Grammar School, Ken worked as a trainee reporter for the *South Wales Echo* and *Western Mail* in 1943-44, then joined the Civil Service, where he remained for 10 years.

In 1955 he became assistant secretary at the Civil and Public Services Association, rising to Deputy General Secretary 12 years later. He helped to devise the civil service pension scheme, introduced in 1972-73, and remained proud of this achievement.

Thomas was a member of the TUC's General Council from 1977 to 1982, and was much in demand as a member of various boards and committees. He was on the Occupational Pensions Board from 1981 to 1997; the Civil Service Appeal Board (1984-91); the Law Society Professional Purposes Committee (1984-86); and the Solicitors' Complaints Bureau (1986-92).

He was also a trustee of the Post Office Pension Fund (1969-84), the London Development Capital Fund (1984-99) and the British Telecommunications Fund (1983-97).

Although he never lived there, Thomas was particularly active in the West Midlands, as a director of the West Midlands Enterprise Board from 1982, the Warwickshire Venture Capital Fund (1988-91) and the West Midlands Growth Fund (1990-2005). He took a close interest in education, science and technology.

He was appointed OBE in 1995.

Thomas enjoyed sailing, book-collecting and classical music, especially Wagner. When he retired from the CPSA he received an unusual gift to mark the occasion: the Welsh composer Daniel Jones dedicated his 12th, and last, symphony to him.

Ken Thomas married, in 1955, Nora Hughes, with whom he had four sons.