

Three national strikes called off by UK trade unions

Tony Robson
30 June 2015

The fact that the Conservative government of Prime Minister David Cameron has not already confronted an emerging strike movement since its re-election on May 7 lies squarely with the trade unions.

In June, no fewer than three planned national strikes were called off in succession by Britain's major trade unions in both the public and private sectors. Firstly, it was the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMT), which suspended a national strike by 16,000 track and signal workers at state-run Network Rail. This was the second time it had called off the stoppage, preventing a 24-hour strike on June 4 followed by a two-day strike action on June 9.

The public sector union Unison called off the strike by 4,300 probation officers in England and Wales planned for June 11. The rout was completed by the unions at Tata Steel—Community, Unite, GMB and UCATT—who called off a one-day national strike of 17,000 steelworkers on June 22. In the case of the rail and steel industry this would have been the first national strike action in 20 and 35 years respectively.

The margin in support of strike action in all these disputes was high, reflecting a determination among workers to mount a fight back after years of unending pay restraint, job cuts and the dismantling of entitlements built up over decades. A tipping point is approaching within every workplace, against a background of widening social inequality and the destruction of health and welfare services. At Network Rail the majority was 80 percent, on a 60 percent turnout, while at Tata steel the largest union—Community—received a mandate of 88 percent on an average turnout of 76 percent.

While the Cameron government has announced proposals to further tighten anti-strike legislation, the developments over the last month highlight the fact that

it is the trade unions which function as the chief mechanism for suppressing a resurgence of militant opposition within the working class.

This fact was recognised by the *Financial Times* newspaper. Broadly supportive of the measures, the FT has warned the Tory government that over-reliance on the new legislation to curb strikes could prove counterproductive.

A May 17 article, entitled “Softly-softly approach to industrial disruption,” points to the risk of provoking a strike movement which the trade unions would find difficult to contain and which would feed into a wider sense of political discontent against a government without a democratic mandate:

“Equally, however, the government should be wary of making it so hard to call an official strike that public employees feel victimised, and justified in taking unofficial action. The 40 percent hurdle for essential services in effect requires workers to vote for action by a supermajority—a 55-45 percent majority for action on a 70 percent turnout would not be enough to authorise action for example. The Conservatives' own general election vote fell well short of this hurdle.”

The house organ of the British financial elite is fully aware that the token strike action organised by the trade unions over the lifespan of the previous coalition government did not constitute any threat to the imposition of austerity measures of a severity not seen since the 1930s. The trade unions are viewed as an indispensable prop of the Cameron government, as it seeks to extend austerity measures still further.

At Network Rail, Tata Steel and the probation services, the trade unions needed only the merest pretext to call a halt to strike action. In the case of Network Rail the RMT has agreed to impose efficiency savings in return for a negligible pay increase. Details

have yet to be made public of the revised deals at Tata Steel regarding the ending of the final salary scheme and ending retirement at 60, and probation services' zero percent pay increase for 2014, but no significant concessions can be expected. The unions at Tata Steel have already offered up £850 million worth of savings to the company, and in the probation service have enabled outsourcing to the private sector, with hundreds of job cuts expected.

Far from a rallying point for action, strike calls have been utilised by the trade unions to offer their continued services to the government and corporations in demobilising opposition and nullifying workers' resistance.

The decline of the unions is not due simply to corrupt leaders and individual organisations, but stems from their pro-capitalist and nationalist character. In the past, on the basis of a nationally regulated economy, these organisations could conduct a limited struggle to redistribute wealth within the confines of private property and the nation state system. Today, in the face of globalised production and the international economic collapse of 2008, they are involved in the race to the bottom—pitting workers in Britain against their co-workers internationally and making the working class pay for an economic crisis created by the financial elite.

The “age of austerity” has accelerated the process of their demise. During the course of the coalition government, the Trades Union Congress managed only one national strike, confined to the issue of public sector pensions in 2011, which was summarily betrayed. The number of days lost through strike action remains at a historically low level, with the average in 2012 and 2013 lower than the preceding decade.

The course of developments makes a mockery of the claims by the pseudo-left organisations such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Socialist Party (SP) that the trade unions still constitute defensive organisations of the working class. This claim is made solely to conceal the strategic experiences the working class has passed through and the unbroken record of betrayals of the unions.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for the SWP and SP to square their anti-austerity rhetoric with their role as apologists for the trade union bureaucracy, in which they have found comfortable berths. Both these organisations avoid any criticism of actions of the

unions in calling off the national strikes. In relation to RMT and Network Rail, the SP had hailed the national strike as a battle line drawn by the union against the Cameron government. It responded to the sell-out by writing, “Planned strike action on Network Rail by the RMT union has forced the employer to double its pay offer for 2015.”

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In relation to the probation services, the SP simply provides a link in its earlier article on the announcement of the June 11 national strike to the Unison website, featuring an official update announcing its suspension based on further talks.

The SWP makes muted criticism of the deal at Network Rail and proposes rejection because of the strings, but keeps silent regarding the RMT's commitment to productivity increases. In relation to Tata Steel, it claims without confirmation that the deal backed by the unions will retain the final salary pension scheme and states that this constitutes a victory. In this context its reference to the unions' support for substantial cuts is only for the record.

These developments give a renewed urgency to the call made by the Socialist Equality Party for workers to establish rank and file committees to break the grip of the union bureaucracy. The fight against austerity requires the political and organisational independence of the working class from the trade unions and Labour Party, and a socialist program to reorganize society on the on the basis of social need, not private profit.



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