

UK Conservative government curtails right to strike

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On Wednesday, Conservative business secretary Sajid Javid presented a new Trade Union Bill to Parliament that represents a massive attack on the right to strike and a threat to civil liberties. It will also slash trade union funding to the Labour Party.

The new proposals, sent out for “consultation” until September, will:

- * Make strikes illegal if fewer than 50 percent of union members vote in a postal ballot and fewer than 40 percent of all workers in “important public services” vote for action, regardless of turnout.

- * Force unions to give employers 14 days’ notice of strike action and renew any strike mandate with a new ballot within four months of the original ballot.

- * Remove regulations that currently prohibit the use of agency workers to cover the work of strikers.

- * Restrict the use of social media during a strike, deeming it a form of picketing.

- * Make unlawful picketing a criminal, as opposed to civil, offence.

- * Force unions to name an official to liaise with the police during a strike at all times and send them details of pickets and demonstrations.

- * Limit the time any public sector worker can spend on trade union duties.

- * Empower local councils to impose community protection orders against trade unions to prevent “intimidation.”

- * Empower the union certification officer to order unions to hand over information during investigations, including the names and addresses of union members.

- * Introduce new powers to fine trade unions over the conduct of internal elections, ballots, the spending of political funds and violations of reporting rules, including an annual audit on strikes, pickets and protests.

* Require all unions, not just those affiliated to the Labour Party, to ask each member every five years whether they want to pay the political levy, thus overturning the current consensus that no party would introduce reforms to party funding without cross-party support.

The Bill has received the enthusiastic support of business leaders. The *Financial Times*, however, has warned that the new legislation could prove counter-productive and lead to increased political opposition. A May 17 article remarked, “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 super-majority—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 [23 percent of the voting population] fell well short of this hurdle.”

The voice of the British financial elite is fully aware that the token strike action organised during the previous coalition government was used by the trade unions to let off steam while they offered their continued services to the government and corporations in demobilising opposition and nullifying workers’ resistance.

In response to the bill, Trades Union Congress (TUC) general secretary Frances O’Grady said it would “make it almost impossible for workers to exercise what is their democratic right and civil liberty” and be “poisonous for industrial relations in the UK.” Aslef train drivers’ union general secretary Mick Whelan exclaimed that the Bill “smacks of Germany in the 1930s” and GMB general secretary Paul Kenny declared, “It is clear the Tory party high command

intend to make the Labour party bankrupt by cutting off the main source of funding that they have relied on since the 1930s.”

These statements, however, are little more than hot air. Interim Labour leader Harriet Harman had nothing to say on the Bill’s many provisions, except for accusing the Conservatives of a “partisan” attack on Labour, which receives about £25 million each year from 4.5 million members belonging to 13 affiliated trade unions with political funds. There were no similar rules being proposed, she added, to limit individual or company donations on which the Conservative Party depends.

The trade unions, based upon their long record, will do nothing of substance to oppose the biggest attack on the right to strike in 30 years. A TUC spokesman told the *IBTimes*, “Defending the democratic right to strike from restrictive rules the new government is proposing will be a top priority for the TUC.”

However, in response to the demand by various pseudo-left groups, he reportedly continued, “A general strike is almost certainly off the cards. One source in a major union said it was completely off the agenda, while another said it categorically would not happen.”

When the last major anti-union legislation was passed in 1983 by the Conservative government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the TUC abandoned even formal opposition—paving the way for its isolating of the year long miners’ strike of 1984-1985 and allowing the Tories to impose the most devastating defeat suffered by the British working class since the 1926 General Strike.

In the ensuing three decades, the unions have functioned nakedly as a loyal appendage of corporate management and the government, in ensuring a virtual absence of any major industrial struggle.

Following the election of the Labour government in 1997, the unions simply continued where they left off under the Tories. They colluded with Prime Minister Tony Blair, continuing to act as paymaster even as he retained every last clause of the anti-union laws and presided over the largest growth in the gap between the rich and poor in history.

Today, the union bosses are offering the same service to the Conservative government, pitting workers in Britain against their co-workers internationally and making the working class pay for an economic crisis

created by the financial elite. During the course of the coalition government, the TUC managed only one national strike, confined to the issue of public sector pensions in 2011, which was summarily betrayed. Last year, only 704,000 working days were lost through strike action. Strikes are at historically low levels, with more working days lost to labour disputes in 1926 alone than in the 37 years between 1974 and 2011 (see graph).

In June, no fewer than three planned national strikes were called off in succession at state-run Network Rail, among probation officers and at Tata Steel. At Network Rail, majority support for a strike stood at 80 percent, on a 60 percent turnout. At Tata steel, the largest union—Community—received a mandate of 88 percent on an average turnout of 76 percent, well above the threshold being proposed in the new Bill.

The course of developments makes a mockery of the claims by the pseudo-left that the trade unions still constitute defensive organisations of the working class. It is a claim made solely to conceal the unbroken record of betrayals of the unions and need for the working class to build new organisations of class struggle to counter the offensive of the Tory government against their jobs, wages, social services and fundamental democratic rights.



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