

UK: Strike action at historic low, and unions work to keep it that way

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The Office of National Statistics (ONS) reports that the number of workers that went on strike in Britain during 2015 was the lowest recorded in more than 120 years.

Just 81,000 workers were involved in strike action in 2015, down from 733,300 in 2014. The previous low was 93,000 in both 1998 and 2005.

This is the lowest level of strike action since records began in 1893. The virtual disappearance of strikes during a period when workers' jobs, wages, terms, and conditions have been under unparalleled attack is a damning indictment of the trade unions.

Such low industrial stoppage figures demonstrate the extent to which the union bureaucracy is engaged in fighting the class struggle on behalf of the ruling class, in opposition to the most basic needs of workers.

Commenting on the figures, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) noted there were just 106 strikes in 2015, less than half the number that took place in 1995, and one-twentiethth of the strikes in 1975.

During 2015, just 170,000 working days were lost to strikes. This was sharply down from 788,000 in 2014 and is the second lowest on record. The lowest on record was in 2005, when just 157,000 days were lost. In contrast, 29.5 million days were lost in 1979 after the "Winter of Discontent" strike wave against the Callaghan Labour government, while 162.2 million were lost in 1926 due to the general strike.

Two thirds of the days on strike in 2015 were linked to disputes over pay. Another 20 percent of the days lost were disputes over redundancies.

Approaching a decade of government-imposed austerity, the British working class is suffering a drastic reduction in its standard of living. Many workers face conditions that are, as pointed out by a recently released parliamentary report on the situation facing agency

labour at Sport Direct warehouses, Victorian in character.

The stifling of the class struggle by the TUC bureaucracy has necessitated them working night and day, hand-in-glove with management and the government to keep the lid on an explosive situation.

TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady responded to the ONS report: "These figures show that going on strike is always a last resort when your employer won't negotiate and won't compromise. Strikes are far less common these days and tend to be short. Most strikes are about people demanding fair pay, which is unsurprising given that real wages have fallen off a cliff in the past decade."

There it is from the horse's mouth. Strikes are only called, for a limited duration, when management refuses to negotiate with a union, as this threatens the privileged role of the union bureaucracy.

The fact that workers' income is falling calamitously and that "real wages have fallen off a cliff in the past decade," is entirely the responsibility of the union bureaucracy.

As the strike-level figures attest, the trade unions specialise in policing the working class. Their central preoccupation is to fulfil the requirements of the corporations and ruling elite.

Another report, authored by the TUC following the June 23 referendum vote for the UK to leave the European Union, amounts to a call for deeper collaboration with the ruling class at the expense of the working class.

Misleadingly titled "Working people must not pay the price for the leave vote," the report details how in reality the union bureaucracy intends to hoist the social and economic costs of Brexit onto the backs of workers.

The report's aim is to assure big business and medium-sized enterprises that close collaboration with the unions is vital to making their operations more competitive and profitable. The TUC puts forward an economic nationalist agenda, centred on "a national plan for industry, financial assistance for industry, modernisation and global competitiveness."

It counsels: "At the heart of the plan should be a modern industrial strategy to revitalise the UK's manufacturing industry. The strategy should include: understanding the UK's existing and potential industrial strengths, and developing an agenda for nurturing those sectors where the UK can remain competitive. ..."

The TUC pledges to play a proactive role in defending British capital. Under the headings "A National Plan for British Jobs and British Industry" and "Immediate Help for Industry," the TUC advocates "A task force of national, regional and local government, unions and business" that "should monitor the situation in sectors and regions, to provide early warning of problems, and lay the foundations for a changed approach."

It warns: "Our union representatives report that industry will face immediate challenges as extreme uncertainty hits demand and impacts on their order books. Automotive, aviation, agriculture, retail and financial service industries are immediately the most vulnerable."

In a prominent section of the report, "Recognising how trade unions can help Britain succeed," the TUC authors remind their partners in crime in Whitehall that further collaboration is required in order to stem the demand from workers for higher wages, and better terms and conditions. It states: "The government must recognise that trade unions have a constructive role to play in the post-referendum environment."

The TUC report cites Germany as a model of corporatist collaboration between management and trade unions that should be emulated: "The involvement of employers and unions in the German response to the global financial crisis from 2008 onwards was a key factor in Germany's earlier recovery," compared to the UK's.

The unions "could help secure deals with employers to preserve jobs (and in some places, sustain whole communities) through this time of uncertainty."

In order to achieve this, "The government should set an example by involving unions in its planning, and should require employers seeking assistance from the national action plan to do so in consultation with the unions representing their workforces."

The TUC insists it is vital the government and business retain their services in suppressing the class struggle, stating, "Throughout the recent steel crisis, unions worked constructively with government and business to safeguard jobs and investment."

They did indeed collaborate closely with government and management, but not on behalf of their membership. Workers at Tata's former steel works in Scunthorpe are seeing the reality of such claims. In April of this year, as part of the deal to prime the Scunthorpe operation for takeover by asset strippers Greybull Capital, the unions recommended, on pain of workers losing their jobs, a 3 percent pay cut along with changes to terms and conditions relating to enhanced payments outside the standard 40-hour week.

Such agreements have been agreed on by unions and management in workplace after workplace, in one section of the economy after another, as the unions have sought to isolate, demoralise and sell out the wages and conditions of their members.

The underlying message is that government and business can only impose the deepening levels of austerity and the economy and become more competitive globally if the unions are allowed to maintain their role as an industrial police force. The ONS figures on all-time-low strike activity make clear just how dedicated the trade union bureaucracy is to this task.



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