

UK government denounces strike wave

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In the face of a growing number of strikes involving thousands of postal workers, rail workers, airport workers and pilots, the Conservative Party government of Prime Minister Theresa May has denounced the strikers and Tory politicians and media outlets have called for stronger anti-strike legislation.

Workers throughout the UK are striking this week in disputes set to continue over the Christmas and New Year period. The strikes are indicative of mounting opposition in the working class to years of attacks by successive British governments, Labour no less than Tory. They are part of an expanding movement of the working class throughout Europe, which has seen an increase in strikes and demonstrations against corporations and governments of all political stripes.

From Monday, some 4,000 workers employed at the UK's Crown Post Offices are striking for five days in a dispute over job losses, the closure of a final salary pension scheme, and the franchising out of post offices to commercial operators. On December 20-21, other Post Office workers who supply smaller sub-post offices will join the strike. In April, the Post Office announced plans to transfer up to 61 branches to WH Smith retail stores in a move to cut costs. Workers fear the restructuring will lead to as many as 2,000 job losses.

Also striking yesterday and today are conductors at Southern Rail who are protesting plans to introduce Driver Only Operated trains. This threatens the jobs of conductors and imperils the safety of train passengers. Further strikes are set for the New Year, with a five-day strike by train drivers planned from January 9.

On December 23, some 1,500 check-in staff, baggage handlers and cargo crew at 18 UK airports are to strike for 48 hours after rejecting a pay offer of 4.65 percent over three years--barely matching inflation--by Swissport. The action is to be followed by a strike Christmas Day and Boxing Day (December 25-26) of up to 4,500 British Airways (BA) cabin crew based at Heathrow Airport. Crew members have rejected a 2 percent pay offer. Those striking have joined the company since 2010 and are

employed on "mixed fleet" contracts, starting at just £12,000 a year plus £3 per hour flying pay.

Virgin Atlantic pilots are to begin working "strictly to contract" from December 23 to demand that the company recognise the Professional Pilots' Union rather than the British Airline Pilots Association.

The rise of working class struggles in the rest of Europe is reflected in a demonstration Sunday by thousands of workers in Madrid protesting the right-wing government's labour "reform;" a 24-hour strike carried out earlier this month by transport workers, dockers, utility and bank employees and university and public school teachers in Greece against new austerity measures; a four-day strike by the Greek seamen's union; and a series of strikes last month by Lufthansa pilots that forced the cancellation of thousands of flights.

The living conditions of millions in Britain have dramatically declined over the last decade, but the economic crisis prompted by June's referendum vote to leave the European Union is driving down wages and conditions yet further. Figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) for the three months to October show the employment rate down for the first time in more than a year--the result of a 6,000 fall in the number in work. Those claiming unemployment benefits rose by 2,400 in November to 809,000. Working-age people deemed "economically inactive" jumped by 76,000 to 8.9 million.

ONS data released last week showed a significant increase in the annual inflation rate to the highest level in two years--up to 1.2 percent in November from 0.9 percent in October. This has been driven by the collapse in the value of the pound since June, leading to a huge increase in the cost of clothing and petrol prices, food and other essential imported goods. Richard Lim, chief executive of consultancy Retail Economics, said, "We expect inflation could hit 3 percent next year against a backdrop of rising unemployment and weaker wage growth."

The outbreaks of strikes, following the year-long

struggle by 50,000 junior doctors that was sold out by the British Medical Association in November, is being described as a new “Winter of Discontent.” This is in reference to the massive strike wave that broke out against the Callaghan Labour government in the winter of 1978–79.

Contrary to the assertions by Prime Minister May, who said on taking office in July that her government would reach out to protect the poor, the offensive against living standards is being intensified. On Monday, a Downing Street spokesman denounced the strikes, saying, “What the prime minister thinks is that the strikes are wrong and that they are causing untold misery to hundreds of thousands of people.”

The *Daily Telegraph* reported Sunday, “Around 20 Tory MPs have... used a private face-to-face meeting to tell Chris Grayling, the transport secretary, that he must consider bolstering legislation around striking.” Grayling said last week that he refused to rule out pressing for further anti-strike legislation.

On Sunday, the *Telegraph* editorialised, asking, “[W]hy is May not being more aggressive?” It called for “new legislation to limit strike action on critical infrastructure.”

The *Telegraph* counselled that, post-Brexit, quelling strikes was critical to the continued ability of British capital to compete globally. “They [workers] cannot--must not--be allowed to dictate the pace of change,” the newspaper insisted.

In the *Daily Express*, Leo McKinstry called for a “solution” that “would end all the strikes at a single stroke.” “The time for appeasement is over,” he declared. He argued that this required overturning legislation contained in the 1906 Trades Dispute Act, under which trade unions can claim immunity for damages arising from industrial action. The act reversed the Taff Vale judgement of 1901, which had been a major spur for the formation of the Labour Party to represent the trade unions in parliament.

Today, the primary function of the trade unions and the Labour Party is to suppress social discontent. In the lead-up to the latest strikes, the unions utilised the *Guardian* newspaper to play down the actions. An article commented: “Headline writers may well examine the current spate of December strikes and draw comparisons to the ‘winter of discontent,’ which helped bring down the Labour government of Jim Callaghan in 1979.”

Citing unnamed union officials, the article went on to say that this “would be an exaggeration of the powers of

Britain’s unions in 21st century.” The “unions no longer have the financial muscle or the volume of members to bring down the government. Employment laws have all but halted widespread wildcat strikes, secondary picketing and public ballots, which characterised the 70s disputes.”

The message to the ruling elite is that the union bureaucracy will utilise its diminished support in the working class, resulting from the unbroken chain of defeats over which they have presided, to police and then betray any struggles that cannot be prevented from occurring, without the government needing to bring in any further anti-union legislation.

This pledge was reinforced over the weekend by Mick Cash, the leader of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, whose members are striking Southern Rail. He told the BBC, “We are a serious industrial trade union, and we are not part of some conspiracy to bring the government down--we are focusing on the concerns our members have over safety on the railways.” Speaking to the Press Association, Cash added that the “RMT is not party to any Trotskyist conspiracy to bring down the government.”

Speaking to *Sky News* Monday, Dave Ward, general secretary of the Communication Workers Union, whose members are striking the Post Office, also insisted that the unions would do nothing to challenge the hated government. “Let me make it absolutely clear, we would never sacrifice our members in some higher political objective,” he said.

Right-wing Labourites went further in openly opposing the strikes, with Labour MP Meg Hillier telling *Sky News* that the strikes were “very unfortunate.” She added, “I think if they’re not careful, they could be shooting themselves in the foot.”

For his part, Labour’s nominally “left” leader Jeremy Corbyn has not said a word about any of the strikes. His only Twitter posting Monday was about the passing of a British rabbi.



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