

UK unions seek to head off further strikes

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Britain's trade unions are working to avert or betray a series of strikes that threaten to cut across the relations they are seeking to establish with employers and the Conservative government, following the leave vote in June's referendum on UK membership of the European Union.

This week, a month-long strike by conductors on Southern Rail was joined by a strike by Crown Post Office workers, while action was scheduled to take place by Swissport baggage handlers and check-in staff and by British Airways cabin crew on the Christmas weekend.

On December 20, the Unite union, led by Len McCluskey, announced that it had reached a deal with Swissport that means its more than 1,500 members at the company have called off their four-hour strike over a derisory pay offer that included freezing overtime payments for the foreseeable future. No details have been released of the new deal agreed at the conciliation service ACAS that a "delighted" McCluskey will recommend to his members.

Talks continued yesterday at ACAS to avert the strike by 4,500 BA cabin crew based at Heathrow Airport. McCluskey appealed to "British Airways senior management now to get involved."

For his part, Mick Cash of the Rail Maritime and Transport Union urged the government to create the basis for a "Christmas Truce" in the Southern Rail dispute presently being waged jointly with the train drivers union, ASLEF.

Cash appealed for the government to intercede in the Southern Rail dispute, which is over the removal of guards from trains. The government, Cash stressed, "has already agreed three new rail contracts in other parts of the country [Great Western, East Coast and Transpennine Express] which have kept the guarantee of the guard while introducing new modern rolling stock... This would provide a basis for a Christmas truce on Southern and negotiations that will deliver passengers a win-win of new, safe, modern rolling stock whilst keeping the guarantee of their guard."

Cash added that he "wrote to the Transport Secretary Chris Grayling last week and I would be happy to meet him, informally and away from the media glare if that helps, to thrash out a workable solution to this long-standing dispute."

According to Royal Mail, just 50 Crown offices have been hit as a result of strike action by 4,000 Communication Workers Union members--against plans to franchise out 61 branches to WH Smith retail stores at a cost of 2,000 jobs. The small number involved is because the CWU has already presided over the franchising out of most post offices.

The gulf between the aggressive response of the government and the constant appeals for compromise from the unions is stark. Speaking of workers involved in industrial strike, one cabinet minister told *The Sun* newspaper, "We have to fight them."

Even as Cash was offering a "Christmas Truce", the *Daily Telegraph* was reporting that soldiers "are standing ready to drive rail replacement buses during Southern Rail strikes as the Government prepares to circumvent union disruption." Defence Minister Mike Penning "revealed that more than 4,000 military personnel were trained to drive buses or coaches, including around 250 in the last month."

The threatened move echoes arrangements already in place for strikes by firefighters, when army "green goddess" fire engines have been used repeatedly. The government intends to reclassify the areas now being hit by strikes as essential services by implementing the Trade Union Act by March 1 next year—to coincide with the planned announcement of the formal start of Brexit with the triggering of Article 50.

The Act, passed last May, requires a 50 percent turnout and a vote by fully 40 percent of the entire workforce in "important public services" including transport. A 50 percent turnout would mean that 80 percent of the vote would have to be for industrial action. A study by Professor Ralph Darlington and Dr. John Dobson of ballots from 1997 to 2015 found that just 440,000 workers

could still have taken action under the new laws, compared with 3.3 million who could not.

Moreover, the Act greatly extends the areas of public service subject to a no-strike ban. Those classified as “important public services” cover large areas of education and healthcare, transport, nuclear decommissioning, firefighters and border staff.

The government and a supportive media make routine references to the trade unions holding the country to ransom and the necessity for yet more repressive anti-union legislation. Yet not only is current anti-union legislation the most restrictive since the early 1900s, it is the union bureaucracy itself that plays the key role in suppressing strikes.

In 1979, 29.5 million days were lost to strikes, whereas last year there were just 170,000. This is after a period of relentless attacks on workers’ living standards, and a decline in wages, since the 2008 crash, comparable only to Greece in the EU.

The passage of the Trade Union Act on May 4 was in fact only made possible by the Trades Union Congress, which mounted no opposition to it. The government agreed the concession that a provision that would have hit its dues-paying base by ending the “check-off” system would be restricted to new members only. In return, the TUC pledged support and millions in funding to the Tory-led campaign to Remain in the EU, even publishing a joint article by Prime Minister David Cameron and former TUC leader Brendan Barber.

Arguing in favour of an alliance with the British Chamber of Commerce and the TUC in the Brexit referendum campaign, its General Secretary Frances O’Grady said the government should rely on the unions, “in terms of having 200,000 workplace representatives who are often opinion leaders in the community, too.”

What concerns the ruling class is that the wave of threatened strikes indicates that, despite their best efforts, O’Grady’s 200,000 “workplace representatives” are in danger of losing control of their members, the workers that are being described as “wreckers”, bringing “chaos” and “misery” to the UK.

There are clear echoes between this reaction to the trade unions and to Jeremy Corbyn’s election and then re-election as leader of the Labour Party. Corbyn has never once stood on principle in defiance of the demands of the ruling elite, as formulated by majority of right wing. True to form, he has not said a word about any of the strikes now ongoing. This left the pro-Tory media to hinge their attacks on him around his attendance at a Christmas party

alongside a number of trade union leaders and functionaries at which supportive noises were made by various representatives of pseudo-left groups.

Hattie Craig, an organiser for Momentum, which acts as Corbyn’s campaign group, was cited by the *Daily Mail* boasting of a “seething tide of working class power,” as well as a text message from Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell pledging “solidarity greetings to all those workers engaged in struggle.” That is all.

How then do things stand?

The ruling class are moving in anticipation of major struggles by the working class by strengthening its repressive apparatus.

The trade union bureaucracy is busy seeking to convince the ruling class of its unswerving loyalty and continued use-value in suppressing members’ struggles.

The working class is demonstrating that it wants to fight against ongoing austerity measures—proving the lie that the Brexit vote showed a shift to the right—but lacks any organisation through which to conduct such a struggle.

Not just in Britain, but throughout Europe and internationally, the working class is being brought face to face with the impossibility of allowing this situation of a one-sided class war to continue any longer.

What is required now is the construction of new organisations of class struggle, excluding all representatives of the union bureaucracy.

Rail and postal workers, drivers and conductors, baggage handlers and cabin crew must take the initiative in electing rank-and-file committees to take their fight out of the hands of their misleaders and prepare a unified offensive against the government and the employers alongside every other section of workers and young people now under attack.

Such a struggle cannot be waged under the leadership of Corbyn’s Labour Party, but requires a politically independent party of the working class that will fight against capitalism and for socialism. The Socialist Equality Party urges all workers who want to wage such a counter-offensive to contact us for discussions.



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