

UK unions suppress strikes for duration of general election campaign

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In the run-up to the snap June 8 general election, the trade unions have sabotaged every struggle of the working class.

Workers in both the public and private sectors have been engaged in long-running and bitter disputes, including on the railways, at the Japanese-based Fujitsu, the carmaker BMW, as well as teachers and college lecturers.

These disputes have been ended entirely, or where the unions were unable to do so, they have only called further strikes well beyond election day. The unions have performed this service not only on behalf of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who wants no association with actual struggles of the working class as he seeks election as a safe pair of hands for British capitalism. It is carried out on behalf of the ruling elite at a time when opposition to a decade of job losses and worsening pay and conditions is intensifying.

In response to pressure from their members, prior to the election, the trade unions had called single days of strikes or 48-hour strikes, on a plant-by-plant/company-by-company or regional basis, with limited picketing—utilising anti-strike legislation to justify minimising the effect of the action.

A planned walkout on May 30 by conductors in the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) union, at Southern Govia Thameslink Rail, Arriva Trains Northern and Merseyrail, was cancelled. The workers are involved in a bitter dispute against the planned introduction of Driver Only Operated (DOO) trains, which threatens thousands of jobs and public safety.

RMT General Secretary Mick Cash announced the cancellation of strike action, immediately, utilising the May 22 suicide bombing at Manchester Arena and citing the “heightened safety and security alerts on our transport services ...”

Southern Rail immediately went on the offensive following the RMT’s capitulation, declaring, “The union now need to use this opportunity to agree to the very good offers we have made, including job guarantees, and work with us to future-proof the busiest railway in the UK for our passengers—most of whom simply want to get to their place of work each day.”

Another dispute called off involved three proposed walkouts—on May 18, May 21 and May 24, by BMW workers. The German auto manufacturer plans to close its final salary pension scheme by the end of the month. Unite will ballot members at plants in Cowley, Goodward, Swindon and Hams Hall on an offer from BMW which even the union feels it cannot recommend. Unite national officer for BMW Fred Hanna said lamely, “While Unite is not recommending the offer, as it will have different outcomes for people and their pensions, members should be proud that by standing together they have forced BMW into making this offer.”

The University and College Union (UCU), citing the Manchester bombing, called off a two-day strike by staff at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) due to take place the week of May 22. Workers are fighting job losses due because of the proposal to close an MMU campus at Crewe in Cheshire.

After the union’s suspension of the strike, management unsurprisingly demonstrated no similar intention to honour Manchester’s dead. The MMU refused a UCU offer to end the dispute by merely postponing its planned compulsory redundancies for this summer and accepting a proposal to go to the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, the government conciliation body. Last week, UCU regional official Martyn Moss said, “Strike action is always a last resort but members will walk out next

month if the university refuses to address the jobs issue,” as the union announced a two-day strike on June 20/21.

On May 19, the Unite union suspended strikes to discuss a new offer to its workforce by IT giant Fujitsu. The offer will be discussed over a lengthy period at various locations, beginning in Wakefield May 26, and finally Derry in Northern Ireland on June 13. Strikes called off were a 24-hour stoppage on May 22, and a further 48-hour action beginning May 25.

Workers at Fujitsu have taken 15 days of strike action since February 28 and ongoing action short of strike action against attacks on pensions and 1,800 proposed job loss. Fujitsu intends to shed 3,000 jobs throughout Europe.

Leaders of the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) college lecturer’s union agreed a deal with employers to call off a three-day strike. Staff were angry, as a previously agreed deal on pay differences between colleges had still not been implemented.

After eight strikes over two months, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) called off action at Forest Hill School in London, until June 15. The dispute, during which parents have joined the teachers’ picket line, involves the imposition of a £1.3 million budget cut by Labour-run Lewisham Borough Council, threatening 40 teaching and support staff posts.

Despite every effort by the union to demobilise struggles, the mounting anger of workers in opposition to years of relentless austerity is seen in the emergence of further disputes.

Nurses in the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) have voted by a 78 percent majority in an online consultation to ballot for industrial action against low pay. Their pay has fallen by 14 percent since 2010 because of the government’s 1 percent pay cap. Some nurses have had to resort to food banks or payday loans to get by.

Staff in the Unite trade union at St. Bart’s National Health Service Trust hospital are also balloting over jobs, pay and working conditions.

Last week, Unite announced that British airways cabin crew are to strike for four days from June 16. The workers, based at London’s Heathrow Airport, have staged 26 strike days over a two-tier pay system. Unite called off further strikes in May after reaching an agreement with the airline, with the details not made public. Unite said the new strike is due to BA’s

“persistent refusal to restore the travel concessions that airline management had withdrawn from those who took part in strike action.”

This week staff at the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) are due to strike over a continuing dispute against job and budget cuts.

Last November, a year-long junior doctors dispute was sold out when the British Medical Association (BMA) accepted the imposition of an inferior contract by Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and his shadow chancellor John McDonnell, made just one visit to the picket line and insisted doctors reach a negotiated settlement with a Tory government.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) recently reported that the latest Office for National Statistics data show the total number of stoppages for 2016 was the eighth lowest since records began in 1891.



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