

UK unions use “consultative” strike ballots to suppress class struggle

Barry Mason and Robert Stevens
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The “consultative” or indicative ballot is becoming the trade union bureaucracy’s weapon of choice in avoiding strikes and maintaining their role as partners with the employers.

Legally, the bureaucracy can hold such ballots at any time under their own rules. Most importantly, the unions are required by law to hold a further legal ballot if they wish to proceed with any industrial action. The consultative ballot never implies action being taken, even if a massive vote in favour is returned.

The “Industrial Action Handbook” of the largest public sector union, Unison, states that in relation to “lawful industrial action... when all your preparations have been completed to ensure we have an accurate ballot register, it will normally take a minimum of 6 weeks from the date upon which we give notice of the ballot to the employer to the first possible day of action.”

It then stresses, “Remember also that no actual industrial action can be authorised or take place on the basis of a consultative ballot.”

Consultative ballots have been used by the unions for several decades, but as resistance and anger among workers mounts during the pandemic—after a decade of relentless and unprecedented attacks on living standards—their use by the bureaucracy is becoming ever more frequent and the norm.

As it was working to sell out 50,000 lecturers and other university staff during a national strike over pension at 64 institutions, the University College Union wrote in an internal document, in March 2018, “The current practice in UCU is that, where possible, branches are asked to run a consultative ballot prior to a formal ballot and that this forms part of the evidence the nationally-elected officers consider when they consider whether to approve the ballot or not.”

Centrica, the owner of UK energy supplier, British Gas, posted a £1 billion loss in 2019. To overcome its financial difficulties the company plans a massive restructuring, cutting 5,000 out of its 20,000 workforce. It also plans to simplify the range of work contracts across the industry. Centrica has announced it would be prepared to use a section 188 notice if unable to negotiate the changes it wants. Under a section 188 notice the company can sack and reinstate its employees on different terms and conditions.

The GMB union, which has 10,000 members working for British Gas, duly organised a consultative ballot. The result was announced on August 19. On a turnout of two thirds, British Gas and P H Jones employees (a heating installation subsidiary of British Gas) voted 95 percent in favour of industrial action.

The GMB notice of the ballot result then called on the Centrica Board to “wake up and smell the gas,” adding, “British Gas was an historically proud British institution—but Centrica’s beleaguered management are betraying a once great brand—and their entire workforce.”

Noting concessions already made and seeking to get the company to negotiate, GMB National Secretary Justin Bowden pleaded, “GMB members have spoken loud and clear in delivering their verdict, now it’s time for the company to listen and get real.”

On September 11, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) announced the result of a consultative ballot of specialist replacement planning engineers (RPE’s) working for Openreach, an arm of British Telecom (BT). Openreach is responsible for maintaining the cabinets, cables, ducts and exchanges, which make up the network of phone and broadband connections throughout the UK. The CWU members voted by a 90 percent majority on a more than 90

percent turnout to be “willing to take part in official industrial action consisting of a strike.”

On July 15, Openreach unilaterally declared its intention to get rid of the role of RPE—and instead “promote” them to a level E management role. This would mean a reduction in leave, sick pay, an increase in the working week by a minimum of 1.5 hours and no entitlement to remain in the defined benefits pension scheme. They would also lose their right to be represented by the CWU. They were given 28 days to sign up to the changed role.

After only a few RPEs had signed up to the new role, Openreach decided not to push acceptance of the management role and allowed them to remain on their previous grade but insisted the new job description should apply. A CWU press release ends, “I would hope that by now Openreach senior management will be aware of the expressions of dismay, helplessness and even despair made by so many of our members in their letters to line managers—and no decent employer can afford to ignore this type of painfully honest feedback—nor the anger that is reflected in this ballot result.

“The company must listen to what its repayment planners are saying, get back round the table and resolve this matter—or be under no illusions that the whole of the CWU will be behind our members to help deliver the right outcome.”

Rank-and-file members of the union would without a doubt support their co-workers. But the CWU’s record demonstrates that the union leadership will “be behind” management. In June, responding to BT’s plans to cut the number of workplace sites by 90 percent on top of previously announced job cuts of 13,000, the WSWS explained “the main concern of the CWU is to prove to BT it can be continue to be relied on to help smoothly implement the upcoming attacks.”

The WSWS noted a CWU statement which declared, “Calling on management to stop pouring petrol on a fire that threatens to burn out of control if more compulsory redundancy notices are served in the coming weeks, [CWU deputy general secretary] Andy [Kerr] concludes: ‘This is not a fight that the CWU has brought on—in fact we’ve done everything we possibly can to avert it by identifying practical solutions that can and do exist’.”

In its plea to management to deepen collaboration,

the CWU bureaucrats boasted that their previous partnership had seen no significant industrial action at BT in response to job cuts and attacks on conditions over a 30-year period.

In March this year, the CWU shelved a near 95 percent majority vote for strike action by over 100,000 postal workers, citing the COVID-19 pandemic.

In August, the UK’s largest union, Unite, held two consultative ballots of London bus workers at Arriva and Metroliner garages. Workers, angered as the COVID-19 crisis has taken the lives of 33 bus workers, voted overwhelmingly in favour of industrial action in the consultative ballots. Some depots voted unanimously to strike. All these votes are being sat on by the union bureaucracy, who intend to do nothing.

The latest use of a consultative ballot to stifle the class struggle is in the dispute of around 500 bus drivers in Manchester with the Go North West company. The company is seeking to fire the entire the workforce and reemploy them on inferior conditions. The ballot result showed 94 percent in favour of industrial action. Unite opposed industrial action, and instead has organised an “international campaign” based on appealing to “stakeholders, partners and associates” of the Go Ahead group (who own Go North West) to resolve the dispute. A Unite official stated that local management were causing “an unnecessary conflict” and pleaded for the firm to “get around the negotiating table.”

When the Johnson government began pushing its homicidal back to work campaign in May, it was the trade unions that played the key role in quashing opposition in the working class. The union bureaucracy worked as a de facto partner of the government and the employers. The working class must draw the necessary conclusions from this and decades of experience and break with these pro-capitalist, nationalist organisations and turn to the formation of rank-and-file, fighting organisations in every workplace.



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