

End of UK lockdown releases suppressed wave of class struggle

Thomas Scripps
16 March 2021

Ending the UK's lockdown is lifting the lid on industrial disputes long suppressed by the trade union bureaucracy.

Employers have used the pandemic crisis as a pretext for ramped-up exploitation. This agenda will escalate as Prime Minister Boris Johnson oversees a return to "normality" centred on a reopening of the economy.

Fearful of the social consequences, Chancellor Rishi Sunak used the Spring Budget to extend the furlough scheme to the end of September, but the contribution made by the government to paying wages will fall from 80 to 70 percent in July and 60 percent in August and September. This manoeuvre staggers the unemployment fallout of the pandemic, with the aim of forestalling an eruption of working-class struggles giving the corporations time to carry out attacks on individual workforces and the state to prepare new repressive measures.

The trade unions are central to this strategy, bound even more closely to the government and the employers over the course of the pandemic. They have suppressed industrial action throughout the last year in the name of "national unity", allowing big business and the Conservative government to launch an assault on workers' jobs, wages and conditions.

Workers are seeking to resist these attacks and have battled through months of trade union delaying and demobilisation tactics to force a growing wave of strikes.

Last week, members of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union at the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) offices in Swansea voted to strike over COVID-19 safety fears by 71.6 percent on a 50.3 percent turnout. Over 500 workers at the DVLA have been infected since September and one has died.

This would be the first major industrial action taken over coronavirus safety in the UK. After a series of wildcat walkouts early last year at workplaces across the

country to protest the threat of COVID-19 and the lack of workplace safety measures, the unions intervened to prevent further action over the virus.

The PCS allowed the DVLA to begin bringing large numbers of staff back into the workplace last autumn. After the offices were forced to close in December due to the huge number of infections, the union allowed them to reopen on January 4. Another surge of infections in January and rising anger among workers forced the PCS to organise a ballot for strike action, delayed until February 19-March 11. Now that the PCS has a strike mandate, it has announced it will meet with management before deciding next steps.

Other sections of workers are in dispute over jobs, pay and conditions. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) announced at the weekend it would ballot its 45,000 members at British Telecom (BT). A consultative ballot in December recorded 97.9 percent for industrial action on a 74 percent turnout. The dispute is over restructuring plans including job losses and up to 50 percent cuts in redundancy payments. It would be the first national strike faced by the company since 1987.

Andy Kerr, the CWU's deputy general secretary, said, "This is a decision we did not want to take... My message to BT Group is that our door is still open". The CWU used the pandemic as a pretext to call off a strike of 110,000 Royal Mail workers in early 2020 and do a deal with Royal Mail Group.

At ScotRail, several hundred Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) conductors have voted for strike action over getting paid less for overtime work than drivers. They will strike on March 28 and April 4, 11, 18 and 25 and work to contract from March 26.

Around 2,000 bus workers represented by Unite have been striking at three subsidiaries of RATP Dev in London—Quality Line, London Sovereign and London United—against a derisory pay offer and attempts to slash

conditions.

Action was due to go ahead today and on March 24 and 31 but has been suspended at Quality Line and London Sovereign while members are balloted on an insulting new offer of a 1 percent pay “rise” plus a £425 lump sum. The strike at London United is going ahead.

The union has consistently divided the disputes across the different subsidiary companies, not even advancing a demand for pay parity. An original programme of multiple-day strikes has been scaled back to one-day actions. RATP is meanwhile introducing a Remote Sign-On practice (another attack on pay and condition) and zero-hours contracts by the back door.

More than 4,000 bus drivers at London bus company Metroline are currently being balloted over Remote Sign-On—the vote runs between March 3 and April 9. Unite vetoed a 97 percent vote for strike action over RSO in October after the company threatened legal action. It did the same with a 90 percent vote for action over driver fatigue in February 2020.

Many struggles involve opposition to the use of “fire and rehire” schemes to force workers onto inferior contracts.

Around 200 Unite members at aircraft parts manufacturer SPS Technologies, based in Leicester, are due to strike on March 12, 19, 22 and 26 against fire and rehire plans that will mean a loss of between £2,500 and £3,000 a year if transferred to the new contracts.

SPS technologies were able to make 200 workers redundant last summer. Unite organised a strike ballot over fire and rehire threats between December 1 and 14 but has only now called a strike, three months later, with the promise to SPS that “Unite’s door is always open”.

JDE coffee in Banbury is using a fire and rehire scheme to impose 12-hour shift patterns and downgrade the pension scheme for new hires. Plans were first announced in March 2020, but negotiations were halted for a year after the first lockdown was implemented. Unite has only now organised a consultative strike ballot of its near 300 members at the site, providing a 96 percent vote in favour. No date has been announced for a real ballot. It once again stressed, “Unite’s door is open 24/7 for constructive talks with the management on the plant’s future.”

Close to 500 bus workers at Go North West are in the third week of an indefinite strike against attacks on conditions and a pay cut of 10 percent, or £2,500 a year, pushed through by fire and rehire. The company has waged a massive strikebreaking operation, using other

companies to run overcrowded services at reduced prices during a pandemic.

Unite have kept strikers isolated from other bus companies where it has representation. Earlier in the dispute, the union offered the company a deal worth more than £1 million in savings, including a one-year pay freeze.

The treacherous role played by the unions is summed up by the recent actions of the GMB union in the British Gas strikes, now in their third month. Around 7,000 engineers are fighting fire and rehire changes that would lead to an effective pay cut of 20 percent. The next strikes are scheduled to be held from March 19 to 22 and March 26 to 29.

British Gas, owned by Centrica, intend to sack workers and rehire them on March 31. Workers are being approached by management to sign the new contract on an individual basis.

In response, the GMB has sent an email to its members which reads, “If you plan to stay with British Gas after March 31 and intend to ultimately sign a new contract, our lawyers [sic] advice is to do so by noon on March 25 if you want to avoid the loss of protected terms and changes you have fought for.”

As with the 2008-9 financial crash, the corporations, backed by the government, are paying for the capitalist crisis out of the lives and livelihoods of the working class. The trade unions impose these attacks on their members, without strikes if possible or, where workers’ resistance is too strong, by sabotaging and selling-out action that takes place.

To fight back, workers need their own organisations of struggle, independent of the trade union bureaucracy, and their own political programme which places their needs above the profits of the corporations. This requires the formation of a network of rank-and-file committees unifying workers across different industries and internationally and the building of a socialist leadership in the working class, the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact