

Strike movement in Scotland sparked by end of lockdown measures

Stephen Alexander
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The relaxation of coronavirus lockdown restrictions in Scotland, as part of a UK-wide reopening of the economy, has sparked a multi-sector wave of strike action, ballots and protests.

Workers are engaged in struggles at universities and colleges, the railways, the National Health Service, the energy and water utilities, together with air traffic controllers, packaging workers and defence industry workers.

All these workers have been designated as essential to the basic functioning of society during the pandemic, consistently risking their lives in unsafe workplaces. Having been cynically lauded as heroes by the UK Conservative and devolved Scottish National Party (SNP) governments, they now face swinging cuts to jobs, pay and conditions. This is part of a global assault by capitalist governments and big business to impose the full cost of the pandemic onto the backs of the working class through fire and rehire schemes as well as brutal austerity.

Workers in Scotland have suffered a steep decline in living standards since the onset of the pandemic. The number of Scots claiming unemployment benefits has risen by 89 percent over the past year to 212,000, including 4,000 new claimants in February. Payroll figures are down by 65,000 on the beginning of last year, with young people and hospitality workers most likely to have lost their jobs. Tens of thousands more redundancies are threatened by the planned end to the Johnson government's furlough scheme in September.

The gutting of living standards across Britain was made possible by the corporatist trade unions and the Labour Party "opposition", which have suppressed workers struggles throughout the pandemic in the name of "national unity"—even as the lives of tens of thousands of workers were sacrificed to profit. Having signed off on corporate bailouts worth hundreds of billions of pounds and repeatedly enforced the unsafe reopening of schools

and workplaces, the union bureaucracy is devoting all its efforts to containing social anger and preventing the emergence of a unified movement of the working class.

College lecturers are opposing mass redundancies and plans to replace lectures with poorly-paid, less qualified instructor assessors. The Education Institute Scotland-Further Education Lecturers Association (EIS-FELA) began a 24-hour strike on March 25, followed by a series of two-day strikes between March 31 and April 20. A number of three-day stoppages are planned for May. Separate strike action took place in March over moves by Forth Valley College to impose compulsory redundancies. EIS members at Argyll college are being balloted over similar "modernisation" plans.

No trust can be placed in the EIS-FELA to fight any of this. This union has overseen cuts to thousands of staff and student places as part of the commercial restructuring and mergers of Scotland's further education system. Despite repeated, almost annual, strike action by lecturers, they are still posed with fighting to defend the very existence of their profession. The EIS has isolated lecturers from other educators in schools and universities across the UK who face identical cuts. Every struggle has instead been subordinated to local, backroom negotiations between union bureaucrats, management and the Scottish government.

The University and Colleges Union (UCU) has played the same role at Scotland's universities, which have exploited the pandemic to accelerate long-running attacks on wages, conditions and pensions of lecturers and staff.

The University of Dundee has threatened 3,000 employees with pay cuts and mass redundancies unless they sign up to "flexible working" arrangements, including unpaid career breaks, reduced working hours and early retirement.

Nurses and health workers held a protest in Glasgow last month, as part of UK-wide demonstrations calling for

better pay, safe working conditions and an end to overwork and understaffing. They rejected the SNP's offer of a derisory 4 percent pay rise, after nurses suffered a 20 percent pay cut over the past decade.

On Sunday, Unison Scotland called on its members to accept with the justification that "This offer is substantially higher than public sector pay deals achieved recently." However, what the union bureaucracy fear most of all is its members throwing out the offer, with the union having to sanction an industrial action ballot and the situation soon spiralling out of its control.

Unison's call for acceptance immediately sparked opposition from health workers on social media. The union's poster calling for acceptance of the miserly deal states in bold as the main reason to do so: "Sustained and substantial industrial action would be required to bring the new government [following the Holyrood elections in May] back to the table after the election." The union have delayed the balloting period to vote on the deal for as long as possible, with the balloting period not closing until May 7, the day after the elections.

Train conductors have launched industrial action against ScotRail operator Abellio. On March 28, members of the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) began six 24-hour strikes taking place on consecutive Sundays. Ticket examiners have voted separately in favour of strike action over payment rates for overtime and rest day working. The RMT, train drivers' union Aslef, the white-collar union TSSA and Unite trade union are considering yet another "consultative" or non-binding ballot of ScotRail workers over widespread opposition to a 1.1 percent pay offer—a real-terms pay cut. Abellio has received a £1 billion public bailout from the Scottish government, underwriting the profits of the Dutch multinational from pandemic losses.

These struggles have been walled off by the RMT from identical struggles of transport workers across the country. This includes its own members at Network Rail, a government-run company that owns and manages much of the UK's railway infrastructure. The RMT is balloting for a national strike against the threat of 14,000 redundancies, as part £1 billion in budget cuts that will slash safety critical maintenance resources by 50 percent.

The RMT's role as an enforcer for rail companies was most clear in its betrayal of the struggle of conductors against the imposition of Driver Only Operation (DOO) trains by the UK's private train operators in recent years. In October 2016, after a series of strikes at ScotRail, a deal was pushed through by the RMT allowing drivers to

release doors and leaving conductors only to close doors.

Scottish Water workers are being balloted by GMB Scotland, Unite Scotland and Unison Scotland over changes to supplemental pay for additional hours worked, amounting to a potential £4,000 loss annually. 100 jobs are under threat at a Business Stream site in Edinburgh, a Scottish Water subsidiary. The unions are calling for "meaningful negotiations", with the Scottish government-run company, "before this dispute escalates to inevitable industrial action".

Scottish Water recorded a turnover of £1.6 billion and pre-tax profits of £86 million in 2019/20.

This corporate looting of workers' pay and conditions follows the pattern of the ongoing dispute of engineers at Scottish Gas (British Gas elsewhere in the UK) against the fire and rehire strategy of owners, Centrica. After 42 days of staggered strike action, the GMB advised its members to sign the new contract which includes a pay cut of 15 percent. The company has been given carte blanche by the union to impose the firing of hundreds of workers who have not yet signed the inferior contract by April 14. On the very day that the workers are due to be fired, refusing to sign or transferred over to the new terms against their will, the GMB has called a token one-day walkout.

Air traffic control workers at Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd are fighting 60 job cuts tabled as part of plans to centralise air traffic control towers across seven airports at a single remote base in Inverness.

Engineering workers at Coulport and Faslane Naval bases took part in limited strike action in March against a pay deal with Babcock Marine, which provides services to Britain's nuclear-armed Trident submarines.

SAICA packaging workers at Edinburgh and Milngavie have been engaged in staggered one-day stoppages since March 17, against moves to extend the working week and impose inferior payment for banked hours.

To take forward these struggles requires their political unification based on a socialist and internationalist strategy. This must be organised independently of the trade unions and all the capitalist parties, in a network of rank-and-file action committees.



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