

COP26 Conference in Glasgow takes place amid escalating class conflict

Tony Robson
29 October 2021

The United Nations COP26 conference, opening in Glasgow on Sunday for two weeks, was to take place amid planned strikes of thousands of key workers both in the city and around Scotland. This did not happen thanks to the utterly rotten character of the trade unions.

As with other such global events, widespread protests are expected. Climate change activists will gather alongside world leaders and political dignitaries, opposing the tidal wave of empty pledges over carbon emissions reductions by those upholding the interests of the chief despoilers of the planet, the corporate oligarchy.

This time, however, protests were accompanied by threats of workers taking strike action over their plummeting living standards during the pandemic, testifying to the growth of the class struggle internationally. The task for the trade union bureaucracy was to prevent this at all costs.

A two-week strike during the entire proceedings of the COP26 conference by over 2,000 rail workers on ScotRail threatened to bring the entire rail system across Scotland to a standstill. ScotRail, owned by Dutch transnational Abellio, runs 95 percent of rail services in Scotland. This was averted by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) calling off the strike voted for on an 84 percent mandate and accepting a below-inflation pay deal on Wednesday.

Rail workers in the RMT on the Caledonian Sleeper service which runs between London and Inverness, operated by Serco, are still scheduled to conduct two separate 48-hour strikes, the first starting on November 1 and the second from November 11.

Around 1,500 Glasgow City Council workers were also due to walk out for seven days of strike action from November 1. Those involved include refuse workers and school cleaners, catering staff and janitors.

From November 8, thousands of local government workers in similar roles were to take five days of strike action across half of all local authorities in Scotland.

These strikes were both also suspended Friday, after local authority body Cosla proposed a pay rise of 5.8 percent, but only for the lowest paid staff, within a £1,062 increase for all staff earning below £25,000. Unison suspended five days of strike action across Scotland while its members are consulted.

The strike action had been billed by the trade unions concerned as an escalation of long-running disputes based on the claim that the Scottish National Party (SNP) government would be obliged to meet the demands of workers to spare its political embarrassment during COP26.

The example of the RMT at ScotRail shows that the only climbdown is by the trade unions. Its agreed-to pay deal for this year of 2.5 percent with a one-off £300 payment is a de facto pay cut with inflation running at 4.9 percent. The RMT has not even balloted its membership over acceptance.

In a clear indication that the deal contains an agreement on cost-cutting measures, a joint RMT-ScotRail press release states: “Our talks acknowledged the pressures on Scotland’s railway, and we agreed that by working together and exploring future productivity initiatives we will be able to build a sustainable future for ScotRail.” It declares an end to all disputes at ScotRail and concludes by stating, “As the disputes are resolved strike action has been cancelled and RMT members have been advised to work normally.”

The pay disputes in Scotland provide a snapshot of how the union bureaucracy is holding back a tidal wave of working-class opposition. In the name of national unity, the trade unions have enabled the ruling class to dictate its homicidal response to the pandemic of

placing profits before the protection of life.

The RMT has attempted to bask in the reflected glory of the strike action over pay at ScotRail and on the Caledonian Sleeper since spring this year, while making sure the disputes remained isolated.

The grounds for national strike action exist across the UK network after the Johnson government announced in January a two-year pay freeze for 62,000 rail workers across 22 operating companies. But the RMT has not lifted a finger to oppose this attack. It has taken its place alongside the other trade unions in the Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG) based on a framework agreement for imposing £2 billion of cuts. That the RMT is touting the sellout deal it has reached with ScotRail as an example for pay dispute resolution means that a similar fate awaits Caledonian Sleeper workers if their struggle against a pay freeze is left in the hands of the union bureaucracy.

As for the deal agreed for local government workers, according to Unison over 55 percent of earn less than £25,000 per year and most have worked through the pandemic without a pay rise. The trade unions have delayed strike action until now, having submitted their pay claim for 200,000 workers 10 months ago, and presided over a pay freeze two years into a pandemic.

The strike action by rail and local government workers would also have been joined by hundreds of bus workers at Stagecoach across Scotland. The UK's largest private bus and coach operator is owned by Brian Souter and Ann Gloag, with a combined wealth of £650 million, the fourteenth-largest fortune in Scotland. Unite and the RMT has blocked the 20 or more pay disputes across the UK at Stagecoach from becoming national strike action and ended individual disputes based on below-inflation agreements.

The trade unions, led by Unite, claim to have adopted a “leverage strategy”, intelligently using external factors to strengthen workers engaged in struggle. If that were truly the case, the ability of rail and council workers to paralyse the activities of the world's most prominent political event would have been the ultimate opportunity to put this into practice. Instead, the various appeals to the SNP government in Holyrood have been used to disarm workers and pave the way to a sellout. The “leverage strategy” is revealed as the utilisation of the bureaucracy's organisational dominance of key sections of workers to suppress the

class struggle and preserve its own lucrative relations with governments and corporations across the UK.

Mounting social conflict surrounding the COP26 conference is evidence that the pre-conditions for a general strike are building up. But to take this fight forward means breaking the stranglehold of the labour and trade union bureaucracy, without which even getting to the point of a strike, let alone winning one, is proving increasingly impossible.

We urge rail, bus, and local government workers, including teachers working in unsafe schools, to form rank-and-file committees, unifying the struggle for health measures to end the pandemic and the fight against deepening social inequality, low pay and exploitation.

Read and share the statement of the International Workers Alliance for Rank-and- File Committees (IAW-RFC) which states:

“The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)