

UK unions' betrayal of 2021's strikes must be answered by forming rank-and-file committees

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Millions returning to their jobs in Britain after the winter break are being driven into unsafe workplaces amid an outbreak of Omicron spiralling out of control. They are being thrust into struggle against employers who care nothing for their health and lives.

After 3.7 million were infected with COVID in the week to December 31, illnesses, hospitalisations and deaths are climbing to new heights, with the Johnson government telling public sector employers to prepare for 25 percent staff absences and expert modellers warning that COVID infections in England alone could reach 1.4 million a day, hospitalisations 15,000 a day, and deaths 3,000 a day if no additional measures are taken. The government has ordered “surge hubs” to be built in hospital car parks.

The fight against this murderous policy unfolds amid an ongoing struggle against the imposition of speed-ups and the refusal of employers and the government to deliver millions a pay rise that even keeps pace with inflation.

The new year will therefore witness an intensification of the class struggle that confronts the working class with the need to develop a strategy and a leadership to take on and defeat big business and the Conservative government.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), in an open letter to workers, urged that “2022 must not be another nightmarish year of mass infections, illness and death!” We have called for the closure of all non-essential workplaces and the transition to remote learning for all schools for a period of two months to bring viral transmission under control and lay the basis for the full elimination of COVID-19; combined with the globally coordinated production and distribution of vaccines and high-quality masks to all workers in all countries, as well as the use of mass testing, contact tracing, safe-isolation and treatment of infected patients, and a dramatic expansion of healthcare infrastructure.

The SEP has insisted that these measures can only be fought for in a political and social struggle against capitalism and the “herd immunity” policy prioritising corporate profit over public health and lives. Mass action by the working class is required to make the major corporations pay for the crisis they have created, including the guaranteeing of living wages and salaries, compensation to small business owners, full medical coverage for the ill, and payments to bereaved families.

We have warned, however, and this will be apparent to millions, that such a struggle cannot be waged without recognising that the chief political allies of the Tories and big business are the trade unions and the Labour Party. These organisations have worked collectively to sabotage any fightback by workers and to repeatedly impose one deadly return to work after another.

Lessons must be learned from the bitter experiences made during two years of the pandemic, especially during 2021 when millions of workers came forward to fight but were sold out by the labour and trade union

bureaucracy.

From the outset, first under Jeremy Corbyn and then Sir Keir Starmer, Labour pledged itself to only “constructive criticism” of Boris Johnson and his gang of cutthroat Thatcherite criminals. The trade unions acted as the frontline enforcers of this political conspiracy.

In 2020, limited social protections such as the jobs furlough scheme and a £20 weekly increase in Universal Credit welfare payments were used by the trade unions to enforce a temporary social peace while suppressing strikes in key industries including Royal Mail and several warehouses and food processing factories. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) sat in conclave with the government to help pass massive corporate bailouts, while agreeing to a workplace regime in which the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) institutionalised non-enforcement of safety measures by characterising COVID as a “significant” not “severe” risk. In January 2021, out of 97,000 COVID-19 safety cases reported in workplaces since the start of the pandemic, only 0.1 percent were followed up by the HSE with prohibition or improvement notices. No company has faced prosecution for contravening safety laws.

At the beginning of 2021, however, with one in 10 workers facing being fired and then rehired on inferior contracts, major strikes erupted in the energy sector, public transport and food manufacture—several the longest in generations.

The unions responded with a strategy of isolation and defeat, even when this led to mass sackings. At British Gas, 42 days of national strike action by 7,000 engineers was ended by the GMB enforcing the signing of the new contract in April, cutting wages by 15 percent and allowing 500 workers who defied the ultimatum to be sacked.

In May, Unite ended an 11-week strike against Go North West by 400 bus workers in Manchester. Parent company Go-Ahead withdrew a fire and rehire threat only because the union agreed to every attack demanded after then General Secretary Len McCluskey and Sharon Graham as head of Unite’s dispute resolution team did a backroom deal to slash jobs, bring in unpaid meal breaks and reduce sick pay and overtime.

In August, after two months of strike action by over 300 workers in Oxford at the Jacobs Douwe Egberts (JDE) coffee manufacturer, Unite declared another victory against fire and rehire while imposing an up to £9,000 annual salary cut. This was justified on the nationalist pretext that it would prevent work being relocated to other plants in Europe, once against pitting each against all in a race to the bottom.

Faced with corporate restructuring and mass redundancies by BT Group, in July the Communications Workers Union (CWU) rubber-stamped an agreement to eliminate 13,000 jobs based on a £1.5 billion cost cutting exercise. It vetoed an official strike ballot after 40,000 of its members had voted by 97 percent for the first national strike since 1987.

The latter part of 2021 saw the employers and their stooges in the trade

union bureaucracy faced with a second wave of strikes, this time over pay, as inflation climbed steadily to its highest level in a decade of 5.2 percent CPI and 7.1 percent RPI and the cost of basics such as heating, food and fuel skyrocketed.

Even under conditions of labour shortages, including 100,000 HGV drivers and 4,000 bus drivers, that threatened critical supply lines, the trade union bureaucracy ensured that workers could not turn this situation to their advantage. A key role was played by Sharon Graham, elected general secretary of the largest private sector union in the UK, Unite, in August with under 4 percent of the eligible vote of its 1.4 million members—a turnout reflecting the broad discontent felt towards the entire union bureaucracy.

The self-anointed “workers’ candidate” has served as the chief industrial firefighter on behalf of the British ruling class. An unprecedented number of strike mandates were overturned or ballots cancelled by Graham on the pretext of “improved” but still below-inflation pay offers. In addition, the supply lines of the major corporations were protected based on a handful of above-inflation pay deals for HGV drivers which did not even constitute company-wide agreements.

On public transport, Unite has prevented 20 pay disputes across the regional operations of the Stagecoach Group from becoming a national strike against the largest private bus operator in the country, accounting for 25 percent of UK services. The outcome of this has been pay agreements which trail behind the rate of inflation, with deals as low as 2.25 percent.

The year ended with Unite, the GMB and USDAW blocking strike action in the run-up to Christmas by thousands of workers at distribution centres for three of the four main supermarkets, Morrisons, Tesco and Asda.

The resistance of the working class is becoming more entrenched and developing in diametric opposition to the union bureaucracy. Warehouse workers at B&Q and bus workers at Stagecoach Yorkshire are presently engaged in indefinite strike action after staging two weeklong strikes, refusing to accept revised offers denying them a genuine pay rise.

But these disputes only confirm that the working class cannot tolerate another year in which a fightback against the employers is sabotaged by organisations that are unions in name only and function as an industrial police force on behalf of the corporate elite as it gorges itself on obscene levels of wealth.

Every struggle waged during the pandemic has also provided a devastating refutation of the political pretensions of the pseudo-left tendencies. Again and again, groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP) have proved that their loyalty is not to the working class but the trade union bureaucracy in whose ranks they have carved themselves a comfortable niche.

Members of the various pseudo-left tendencies are rooted in a petty-bourgeois layer, often with relatively comfortable careers in local government, academia and the public sector. Many have positions as reps, regional union posts and even places on the national executives of major unions.

They routinely employ militant phrases to counter workers’ anger towards the national leadership, only to insist at the death that nothing can be done other than to accept whatever miserable sellout is agreed with management. After every betrayal the demand is issued for workers to “pressurise” the union leaders to “demand” this thing and that, knowing that the unions’ response to pressure from below is to cling ever more firmly to corporate management.

Their unconditional loyalty to the union apparatus and hostility to any independent action by workers found grotesque expression during the Go North West dispute, when regional official Ian Allinson described the *World Socialist Web Site*’s accurate reporting of talks on a sellout being cooked up between Unite and Go Ahead as “libellous garbage” and called

the SEP “scabs” (on the union bureaucracy!).

The pseudo-left always act as cheerleaders for any bureaucrat projecting a bogus “left” image, providing this service in Unite first to the widely discredited McCluskey and then hailing his replacement Graham as the second coming. But defending the bureaucracy is increasingly an act of self-defence because of the leading positions occupied by the pseudo-left within the union hierarchy.

Last year ended with a concerted campaign by the trade unions to demobilise demands for a pay struggle in the National Health Service through months of “consultative ballots,” from which most workers concluded that no fight would be waged and abstained from voting.

The difficulty this posed for the usual apologies of the pseudo-left was that it has control of the largest health union, Unison, with six SWP members and four SP members on its National Executive Committee. This forced the SP to argue that they still faced “a battle with the right and a whole layer of the full-time officers for lay-member control of the union,” and the SWP to argue for a rear-guard action by “activists” to “fan any flicker of resistance.”

The lesson of the pandemic is that no struggle can be carried forward except through a root-and-branch rebellion against the trade unions. In May 2021, the International Committee of the Fourth International initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), urging workers to organise independently of organisations dedicated to the suppression of the class struggle.

This call has won growing support among workers around the world, especially those involved in critical strikes such as Volvo Trucks and John Deere in the US, seeking to oppose the isolation of their struggles and sell out deals recommended by the union bureaucracy. In the UK this fight has been taken forward through the London Bus Rank-and-File Committee and UK Educators Rank-and-File Committee, which have linked up with transport workers and school workers internationally, providing the only basis for opposing the mass infections and deaths produced by the herd immunity offensive of the ruling class.

The SEP calls on all workers to make contact and take part in the fight to develop the network of rank-and-file committees in every sector and workplace.



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