Strike wave in Northern Ireland against below inflation pay offers

Steve James
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A wave of strikes and strike ballots in Northern Ireland show workers' determined efforts to combat falling living standards. As is the case internationally, the cost-of-living crisis, accelerated by the disastrous NATO-Russia conflict in Ukraine and coming on top of the pandemic, is driving an intensification of the class struggle which the trade unions are working to isolate, suppress and bury.

Sections of workers involved in or preparing strikes include Translink bus workers, local authority classroom assistants, waste and recycling workers and school bus drivers, fast food delivery workers, university lecturers and construction machinery workers at Caterpillar. All are faced with finding a way to unify their struggles and take them out of the death grip of trade unions working to subordinate workers to the interests of the employers.

Translink is Northern Ireland's main bus company and is a private subsidiary of the state-owned Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, which controls UlsterBus, Metro and Northern Ireland Railways, all of which trade as Translink. It employs around 2,000 bus workers who have on three occasions rejected the company's 3 percent annual pay offer. With inflation running at between 7.8 and 8.2 percent, amid the massive price hikes imposed by the Johnson government, the offer, which a company spokesperson described as "fair and reasonable", is a substantial pay cut.

On April 1, the GMB reported 82 percent of its Translink members had voted to strike, while Unite reported a simple majority. Despite the outcome, Unite and the GMB resorted to a further "consultation". Unite's Deputy Regional Secretary Davy Thompson wagged his finger at Translink, calling on the company to "realise the error of its ways, table an improved offer and return to the negotiating table."

GMB organiser Peter Macklin took the same approach, hailing the fact that the unions had kept bus drivers working during the worst peaks of the COVID-19 crisis. He told the *Belfast Telegraph*, "Translink fails to recognise what workers went through during the pandemic. They kept transport running so other essential workers could get to and from workplaces to perform vital roles."

The unions' intention to organise a sellout as soon as possible is made clear by their own pay claim figure of 6 percent, also below inflation.

Although a strike date of April 25 has belatedly been set, opening a weeklong cessation of bus services, to be followed a one-day strike May 6, Translink issued a statement confirming they were "committed to working with the unions to avert this unprecedented industrial action". Translink and the unions are also in discussion over efforts to neutralise the strike's impact, even if they are unable in the meantime to prevent it. The company has been trying to extract promises to keep school bus and tourism related services open.

Local authority workers are preparing strike action over pay claims. Thousands of workers, members of the NIPSA, Unite and Unison unions, providing crucial frontline services were offered a miserable 1.75 percent, for 2021/22 which was roundly rejected late last year. A one-week strike was held last month by school meals staff, school bus drivers and cleansing and bin workers. Unite have conceded a further series of stoppages involving education authority and local government workers between April 25 and May 8. School meals, yellow bus school transport, and some non-teaching and housing executive work will again be impacted.

As with Translink, however, orchestrated and

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systematic foot dragging by the unions has led to a situation where workers are still pursuing last year's pay claim. Early March, a joint statement from Unison, NIPSA, GMB and Siptu covered their refusal to take up any struggle. The statement claimed that despite the 50 percent membership turnout threshold for industrial action only being applicable in England and Wales and not in Northern Ireland, no action could be organised because of the "forthcoming end of mandate of the current Northern Ireland Executive and Ministers." Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly are due May 5.

In a separate dispute, 160 NIPSA education welfare officers took 16 days strike action in March. The strike, the longest ever pursued by the welfare officers who are qualified social workers, is in pursuit of pay parity with welfare officers working for the health services who are paid around £5,000 more annually.

University lecturers and support staff at Queens University and Ulster University are also involved in protracted struggles over pay and pensions.

Private sector workers are involved in major disputes. Workers employed by heavy construction machinery manufacturer Caterpillar held a four-day strike last week over pay. The strike followed a vote to reject a below inflation offer of 9 percent over two years along with compulsory overtime.

Workers struck the company's sites in Belfast and Larne. Further four-day strikes will also take place on April 25, May 3 and May 9. Workers mounted well attended pickets at the Northern Ireland sites, which were widely respected. One striking worker was injured after being forced to jump out of the path of an HGV lorry driven recklessly at speed through the picket line.

Caterpillar, one of the world's largest machinery manufacturers, has a cash pile of $9.3 billion. In defence of its loot, the company has been reported trying to recruit a scab workforce from its management staff in the UK to fill production roles at the Northern Ireland sites. Caterpillar employs as many as 10,000 workers at its UK facilities, including at its Perkins subsidiary sites in Peterborough and Stafford. Worldwide, the US based outfit employs as many as 107,700 people at 150 primary locations.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham demagogically denounced Caterpillar's strike breaking as "utterly irresponsible and a disgraceful way to treat a workforce that has powered Caterpillar to huge profitability." Graham, of course, took no steps to sound the alarm among or mobilise Unite's Caterpillar members in the UK, let alone its 1.4 million overall membership, against the transnational company's aggressive and dangerous actions.

In March, fast food delivery workers, members of the App Drivers and Couriers Union, took part in the first gig economy strike in the north of Ireland in pursuit of improved pay and conditions. One worker, with a child to support, told the *Irish Times*, "I've been working for Just Eat and Deliveroo since last August. The pay was quite good but last December Just Eat dropped our pay by 25 percent. I'm doing a minimum of 12 hours a day and working of two different apps which is more stressful."

Taken together, transport, local authority, manufacturing and gig economy workers have enormous potential social power with which to combat their ruthless, wealthy, state-backed and frequently globally organised employers.

Constrained by the trade unions, however, workers' struggles remain isolated and fragmented along sectoral, workplace and departmental lines. Finding a way forward depends on workers creating new organisations of struggle based on the principle that workers' interests must take precedence over private wealth, corporate profit and the national interests of rival, competing and warmongering capitalist nation states. They should contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees today!

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