

British ruling class fears “summer of discontent”

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Workers in the UK are in a strong position to launch an offensive for improved wages and conditions but are being hamstrung by the trade unions.

The *Sunday Times* admits as much in an April 17 article showing that the British ruling class is acutely aware of the social explosion threatened by its pursuing war against Russia abroad and austerity at home, precipitating an historic fall in living standards amid an ongoing pandemic.

The piece asks, “Is Britain heading for the summer of discontent?” The reference is to the 1978-9 Winter of Discontent which saw millions of days of strike action over pay during the Labour government of James Callaghan.

Part of the Murdoch empire, the *Times* article was written by editor for the City of London section Jill Treanor, together with reporter Laith Al-Khalaf, and clearly reflects the concerns haunting Conservative government ministers and business executives alike.

Describing the current record inflation and tight labour market (there is now one vacancy for every unemployed worker), Treanor and Al-Khalaf say the situation is “raising questions about whether workers are going to be powerful enough to wrest inflation-busting wage rises from employers”. They add, “There is a feeling that the balance of power weighted in favour of management for decades is beginning to shift.”

Large sections of the working class are currently pushing for action, including 40,000 rail workers balloting for a national strike, a similar number of BT workers doing the same, and refuse workers engaged in local disputes all over the country. Tens of thousands of university workers have taken weeks of strike action this year and recently renewed their ballot. Education workers have voted at their annual conferences to fight for above-inflation pay increases. On May 3, around a thousand workers at the UK’s 114 Crown Post Offices are set to walk out to oppose Royal Mail’s refusal to grant a pay rise for 2021-22.

The *Times* raises its warnings with reference to the trade unions. Its authors note, “The Trades Union Congress (TUC) has already registered the highest number of industrial disputes (300) in five years—after a period of record-low industrial strife”. They include an interactive strike map identifying each dispute across the country.

But the same article reveals that the unions’ role is not to lead the charge of a militant working class, but to head it off. The authors explain, “given the high demand for workers from so many employers, economists have anticipated wages rising across the board—and are confounded by what has actually happened. ‘It’s an odd situation where economists would expect pay inflation to take off at this point, and working people actually to be able to start raising

their pay. But we’re not seeing that—prices are still rising faster than wages,’ [senior lecturer in economics at the Open University Alan] Shipman said.”

On Monday, the *Times*’s economics correspondent Arthi Nachiappan provided the grisly details in, “Wage rises on the back burner despite inflation”. She reports, “Forty-eight percent of companies are not awarding pay rises, according to research by the Chartered Management Institute. Of the 52 percent of companies who are, the average increase is 2.8 per cent—less than half the [Consumer Prices Index-CPI] rate of inflation.” That rate is expected to climb towards 10 percent over the year—Retail Price Index (RPI) inflation is already at 9 percent.

This would worsen an already crippling situation for workers’ budgets. Annual pay growth to February, excluding bonuses, was 4 percent, less than half RPI inflation in the same period. In the public sector, where union density is significantly higher (52 percent) than in the private sector (13 percent), pay growth was much lower, just 2.1 percent. Two of the worst rates of annual pay growth to February, including bonuses, were for education (1 percent) and public administration (1.4 percent) workers; the two sectors with the highest union density, at roughly five in 10 and four in 10 workers respectively.

The slashing of real wages has not been achieved through a crushing defeat of the unions but with their collaboration. Successive waves of industrial action have been carved up, delayed, demobilised and betrayed, with swathes of redundancies and below inflation pay deals imposed.

What could have been a national strike at the largest private bus operator Stagecoach was divided into a series of separately fought and sold-out disputes by Unite. Bus drivers in the capital, employed by different operators, were split up the same way. Thousands of distribution workers for some of the UK’s largest supermarkets met the same fate at the hands of Unite, USDAW and the GMB. University workers have been worn down by the UCU’s refusal to wage an effective struggle in defence of their pay and pensions, with savage cuts enacted earlier this year.

Unions in the public sector, including UNISON, the Royal College of Nursing, the National Education Union and Unite, oversaw the imposition of below inflation pay rises for health, education and local government workers, without a strike even being launched—either by refusing to organise a ballot or failing to win a mandate from members disgusted by years of betrayals. In the private sector, the Communication Workers Union averted a national Royal Mail strike and what would have been the first national strike at BT since 1987.

Attacks on wages and conditions were allowed to be pushed through

with the threat of “fire and rehire” at British Gas, Go North West, British Airways and Jacobs Douwe Egberts, to name only the most prominent defeats.

Through these efforts the unions have kept industrial action safely within the bounds of the historic lows maintained since the end of the 1984-5 miners’ strike, with the average number of days lost to strike action each year in 1990-2019 less than a tenth of the figure for 1960-1989. Nothing flattering is implied of the unions of the 1970s—whose pro-Labour Party, nationalist politics could provide no way forward for the working class, opening the way to Margaret Thatcher’s 1979 election—to say that the contemporary unions are corporatist shells by comparison.

They are the forces through which Governor of the Bank of England Andrew Bailey’s infamous demand for wage “restraint”, cited by Treanor and Al-Khalaf, is being enforced. The authors also quote the revealing response to Bailey of deputy general secretary of the TUC Paul Novack: “The chancellor himself said that inflation has been driven by what’s happening to energy prices; it’s not about wages spiralling out of control.”

Novack and the TUC see the 300 disputes cited by the *Times* as a hit list, with each one to be throttled in turn. The figure was first reported by the *Guardian* under the headline, “Strikes in UK at highest in five years as inflation hits pay”. It was forced to issue a correction, “The headline of this article was amended... to refer correctly to industrial disputes, not strikes.”

This is the state of the class struggle in the UK. Workers are straining for a fight against the employers and the Tory government; the unions are working overtime to prevent a strike wave developing; the sections of the affluent middle class who staff papers like the *Guardian* and recognise this service are doing what they can to boost the unions’ shredded reputations.

Columnist Owen Jones provided the most shameless and ill-advised example at the end of March, warning, “Exploiters such as P&O”, who had just sacked 800 ferry workers on the spot and replaced them with a slave-wage overseas crew, “watch out—there’s a new wave of trade unionists coming for you”.

Describing an “existential menace to trade unions”, Jones noted, “Trade union membership is around half of its 1979 peak” and the “very concept” of trade unionism “is alien to many younger people”. But, he insisted, “unions are the only viable challengers to the P&Os of this world—and that fact is surely becoming ever more obvious.”

A week later, the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union responsible for the P&O workers had overseen a rout, with not a single job saved and not a day of solidarity action called as it joined the Labour Party in making nationalist and always futile appeals to the Tories to “Save Britain’s Ferries”.

These are organisations which defend nothing. Far from proving the unions’ rediscovered militancy, events at P&O were a damning confirmation that there is no attack too brutal the employers can launch that will force them into serious opposition.

Jones’s risible attempt to evoke a “union resurgence” is part of a broader effort to stop workers drawing the necessary conclusion from this situation that new organs of class struggle are needed. When the *Times* writes that “some experts see opportunities for the unions to prove their purpose”, or the *Financial Times* of “a test for Britain’s unions in the most intense period of worker unrest since the 2016 Trade Union Act placed new, onerous limits on their activities”, what really concerns them is whether the unions can get out in front of a mass movement of the working class they know is coming, the better

to bring it under control.

An absurd myth has therefore been built up around the Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham—a “new broom... shifting the focus... to the nitty-gritty of what unions used to do: getting better deals for workers” (*Times*) and “the biggest potential threat yet to the Thatcherite anti-union settlement” (*Guardian*)—to provide proof of the unions’ supposed vitality.

Graham in fact sums up the modern trade union movement better than Jones and his ilk would like. A political nobody whose life has been spent in backroom discussions with managers, shareholders and investors as part of Unite’s “leverage” department, elected by fewer than 50,000 people out of 1.2 million members, she hovers like the grim reaper over every strike.

Under her leadership, Unite officials have been the foremost firefighters damping down outbreaks of working-class struggle, negotiating above inflation pay rise only in critical sections of the economy with acute labour shortages such as among HGV drivers. The vast majority of disputes were sold out in below inflation deal defeats that are falsely portrayed as “wins” by Graham’s many pseudo-left hangers-on.

That the second most commonly cited proof of union dynamism is the small Independent Workers’ Union of Great Britain (IWGB), an organisation which recruits mainly super-exploited migrant workers ignored by the major unions and with less than 7,000 members, but which remains oriented to the TUC, says everything about the reality of a “union resurgence”.

The trade unions barely feature in the lives of most UK workers, three quarters of whom are not in a union and not covered by a collective agreement in their workplace. Those that are members confront in these organisations a hostile force, led by general secretaries with incomes in the top five percent, standing on the side of the employers and the government. A bureaucracy which through its suppression of industrial action has facilitated spiralling inequality for decades, stagnating wages since the 2008 financial crash, and now sharply falling pay in service to the war drive of British imperialism.

As fights for wages, jobs and conditions develop this summer and beyond, the working class is faced with the difficult but necessary task of constructing new organisations to lead the class struggle—rank-and-file committees independent of the trade unions, guided by workers’ needs, not corporate relationships. The growth of support for the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) represents the initial expression of an emerging mass movement of the working class in the UK and throughout the world.



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