

The British rail strike: Mobilise the entire working class against the Johnson government!

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)

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The biggest national rail strike in the UK in a generation, involving more than 50,000 workers, is scheduled for June 21, 23 and 25. The spearhead of a wave of threatened strikes, it marks the re-emergence of mass struggles by the British working class after decades of suppression by the trade unions and the Labour Party. And it is set to take place as workers all over the world come into struggle amid a devastating inflationary spiral.

Two basic issues are posed in this struggle:

First, there is no way forward outside of direct confrontation with Boris Johnson's Conservative government, the most reactionary and corrupt in British history. The whole strength of the working class must be brought to bear against the plans of the government to suppress and criminalise the strike.

Rail workers confront the Johnson government's plans for Great British Railways, a Thatcherite agenda for Privatisation 2.0. Seizing on the collapse of fare revenue during the pandemic, when the government bailed out train companies with billions in cash, the Tories have unveiled plans to axe thousands of jobs, slash wages and gut conditions, safety and pensions. It is the spearhead of a class war offensive against the entire working class.

Second, workers must take measures to ensure that their fight is not sabotaged by the union bureaucrats in the rail unions and the Trades Union Congress, who will do everything they can to smother and shut down an insurrectionary struggle of British workers. This raises the necessity for the development of powerful rank-and-file organisations controlled by the workers themselves.

The working class comes into struggle

The rail strike will involve workers across Network Rail, which manages the UK's tracks and maintenance, and 13 of 15 train operators. The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) has announced another 24-hour strike on the London Underground on June 21, following a June 6 strike by 4,000 workers.

The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF), the train drivers union, has called strikes on Greater Anglia, Hull Trains and Croydon Tramlink. The white-collar Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) is to strike on Avanti West Coast and is balloting 6,000 members for action nationally.

The strikes are coming during an emerging "summer of discontent" among key workers in essential services.

British Airways workers have voted by 97 percent for industrial action.

The Unite union is balloting 500 check-in staff, together with the GMB union, at Heathrow Airport.

Communication Workers Union members at 114 Crown Post Offices struck this weekend. Tens of thousands at BT Group (British Telecom) begin balloting for strike action June 15 for what would be the first national strike at the telecom company in 35 years.

Arriva buses in large parts of Yorkshire have been hit by an indefinite strike by drivers. The Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) representing civil service workers is striking June 15-17 against plans to slash 20 percent of the workforce, or 91,000 jobs.

Refuse strikes are taking place across the country, including in Coventry, where workers continue their action in the face of a Labour Party-led strikebreaking operation. In Scotland, Unison and GMB members are being balloted in a dispute that would close schools, early years centres (early childhood centres) and waste and recycling plants.

Nurses in Scotland want to strike to demand a 10 percent pay rise. UK-wide, Unison has threatened to ballot 500,000 health workers if the government tries to impose a 3 percent pay award. The British Medical Association has warned it will call for a strike.

Workers are fighting against intolerable living conditions. Household incomes, after the longest period of wage suppression since the Napoleonic Wars, are being cut to the bone by inflation of 11.1 percent. The cost of filling up an average family car has topped £100, sparking a planned Europe-wide fuel protest on July 4. The average renter is paying £1,000 a month.

Real pay, excluding bonuses, fell 6.9 percent on the year this April, using RPI (retail prices index) inflation. The decline in the public sector is a staggering 9.2 percent. Millions are forced to work overtime to support families they hardly ever see.

Workers are cutting back on meals, travel, heating and electricity use. Close to one in five people are food insecure, rising to 30 percent for young families. One in six people are using food banks.

Ruling class prepares crackdown on "the enemy within"

The working class is on a collision course with the Conservative government, which has responded with threats of state-organised strikebreaking.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson pledged to ban strikes in essential services without the provision of minimum service requirements. Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said he will legislate to allow agency workers to provide scabs to defeat a rail strike driven by "Marxists." Former Tory

leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith warned that the damage to the industries of a rail strike could mean this “allows prosecution to take place.”

The ruling class is openly discussing the threat of a general strike, ending four decades of an unprecedented suppression of the class struggle since the defeat of the 1984-85 miners strike. Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* warned, “Britain could suffer its first general strike in 100 years.”

Bernard Ingham, the former press secretary of Margaret Thatcher during the year-long miners’ strike, railed in the *Express* that her description of the miners as “the enemy within” now applied to rail workers.

Linking opposition to strikes directly to NATO’s proxy war against Russia in Ukraine, Ingham denounced the “Hard Left army... whose silence over Vladimir Putin’s invasion of the Ukraine speaks volumes,” while they “make hay out of a rising cost-of-living crisis.” He urged, “Let us just ban strikes in all defined public services on which the economy and public safety and security depend.”

The working class must take this tidal wave of class hatred seriously. Workers are not just coming into conflict with this or that corporation, but with a government intent on making them pay for the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and with a state apparatus that will be deployed ruthlessly against them.

The prospect of a general strike is real, due to widespread sentiment for defeating and bringing down a despised government whose austerity drive, “let rip” response to COVID-19, and reckless warmongering have produced untold suffering. But this must become the conscious aim of the emerging movement.

The ruling class wants to finish the job Thatcher began in 1984, when she set out to break the miners to end all opposition to her social counter-revolution. The working class must seize the opportunity to revenge that defeat and reverse the decades of betrayals and losses that followed.

Essential lessons of the 1973-74 miners strike

A fundamental class struggle no one in the ruling class wants to raise is the 1973-74 miners strike.

Amid a deep crisis of world capitalism, millions of British workers, led by the miners strikes of 1972 and 1973-74, came forward in struggle against the Tory government of Edward Heath. Heath responded by building up the forces of state repression, placing responsibility for imposing emergency powers on a Civil Contingencies Unit and preparing to use the army. He then called a general election in February under the slogan, “Who runs Britain, the government or the unions?” Despite government threats, the miners stayed on strike throughout the election campaign and Heath lost his majority.

It was left to an incoming minority Labour government to get the situation back under control. Labour used all its political authority in the working class to wind down social opposition, settling a massive pay claim on the miners, withdrawing Tory anti-strike legislation and raising pensions and social security benefits. It then worked with the TUC to draw up a Social Contract for supposedly voluntary wage restraint. The betrayals of that government led four years later to the coming to power of Thatcher in 1979.

The 1984-85 miners strike

The real lessons of the 1984-85 miners strike must also be understood.

Miners faced a brutal state attack during which 13,000 were arrested, 200 were imprisoned, two were killed on picket lines, three died digging for coal, and 966 were sacked. The mining industry was ultimately destroyed.

But defeat was made possible only by the miners’ isolation and the betrayal by the trade unions and the Labour Party. Like labour bureaucracies the world over, they responded to the globalisation of production by abandoning their programmes of national economic reform and becoming the open instruments of big business. The defeat laid the basis for the emergence of New Labour as a Thatcherite party indistinguishable from the Tories. The trade unions became the industrial police force that actively suppressed strikes.

In the 1970s, an average of 12.9 million days were lost every year due to industrial disputes, with 29.4 million lost during the “Winter of Discontent” of 1978-79. In the 1980s, the yearly average was 7.2 million, mainly due to the 27 million days lost in the miners strike.

In the 1990s, average annual working days lost plummeted to just 660,000 and never really rose again. As a result of the constant betrayals by the unions, union membership had collapsed to just 6.6 million, from 11 million in 1984. In the private sector, less than 19 percent of workers belonged to a union.

During the pandemic, the trade unions took their collusion with the employers and the government to a new level, suppressing strike after strike, signing off on a trillion-pound bailout for the major corporations and then enforcing a return to work with the COVID-19 virus still uncontrolled. Their present militant rhetoric changes nothing. It is required to maintain control of their members while they engineer a sellout.

As for the Labour Party, nothing remains of the insincere left feint made during Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership. With Corbyn having handed the party back over to the Blairites without any fight whatsoever, Labour today stands in open unity with the Tories on austerity, herd immunity and the war in Ukraine. It will back whatever repressive measures are taken by Johnson.

For the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees

This poses the essential question that rail workers and the entire working class need new organisations of struggle, controlled by workers themselves not the union bureaucracy. They must mobilise their enormous social power as an international class, breaking down all sectional and national divisions to fight for their common interests.

The strikes and ballots in the UK are part of a growing wave of militancy internationally, provoked by the same desperate cost-of-living crisis. Since February, general strikes have taken place in Greece, Italy and Belgium. European-wide action, including wildcat strikes, is being taken by aviation workers in Amsterdam, Brussels and Paris airports, and at EasyJet in Italy and RyanAir in Spain, Belgium, France, Italy and Portugal. Health care workers have struck or plan to strike in Germany, France, Spain, Slovenia and Turkey in Europe—and in India, Sri Lanka, New Zealand, Uganda, Kenya, Sudan and the United States.

Nationwide strikes and protests have rocked the Sri Lankan government. Turkey is seeing its highest levels of industrial action since the 1970s. Major struggles are threatened among US and German dockworkers and have already broken out among South Korean truck drivers.

The emerging global movement of the working class requires a globally coordinated leadership. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), launched by the International Committee of the Fourth International in April 2021, plays the central political and organisational role in encouraging and directing this movement.

Committees have already been established in key industries in the US, Canada, Sri Lanka, Germany, Australia and among bus workers and educators in the UK under its leadership.

The formation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace and industry in the UK will create the necessary conditions for workers to defeat all efforts by the trade unions to sabotage their fightback, unite the emerging fronts and bring down the Johnson government.

A programme of action for workers in Britain

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to fight for the following demands:

An inflation-busting 20 percent pay rise for rail workers! This must be fought for through coordinated action by drivers, conductors, maintenance and station staff. Against the claims that there is “no money” to fund public transport, decent pay and pensions, they must fight for socialist measures, including the expropriation of the rail companies under workers’ control.

Defeat the Great British Railways scheme! The pay freeze imposed on rail workers, over £3 billion in cuts, and the threat to eliminate thousands of jobs and eviscerate pensions are all part of the Tory plan for Great British Railways. The RMT, ASLEF and TSSA are Johnson’s partners in this scheme through the Rail Industry Recovery Group.

Expand and unify disputes in every sector! Workers are voting for strike action over the same issues and confront determined, ultra-wealthy employers. The unions’ efforts to suppress and divide struggles must be overcome and preparations made to organise a general strike.

Wage a political fight to bring down the Johnson government! A general strike cannot succeed in its aims without mounting a political challenge directly against the Johnson government implementing historic attacks in every sector on behalf of the corporations and the super-rich.

Build the Socialist Equality Party as the leadership of the working class! The Labour Party offers no alternative to Johnson’s Tories. They are equally right-wing parties of authoritarianism, militarism, mass infection and austerity. Workers need their own party to fight for their interests on a socialist, internationalist programme.

We urge all those workers and young people who want to take part in such a struggle to contact the SEP today.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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