

Tens of thousands demand action at Trades Union Congress rally on eve of UK rail strikes

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An estimated 40-50,000 people demonstrated in London Saturday in the “We demand better” cost of living rally held by the Trades Union Congress (TUC).

The protest held on the eve of ahead of this week’s national rail strikes by 50,000 rail workers on June 21, 23 and 25.

Seeking to maintain control of an emerging strike wave, the union bureaucracy pulled out all the stops. Even so, while the demo was somewhat larger than the annual TUC protests in recent years, it was much smaller than that held in 2011 of around 200,000, called after the Conservative government came to power and first launched a savage austerity offensive.

Organised amid a powerful sentiment among workers for taking on the Johnson government and the employers, the turnout testifies to the decline in the authority of the trade unions after decades of betrayals—that a necessary turn to more militant rhetoric cannot conceal.

Many of those participating were of an older layer of trade union representatives, including local officials, shop stewards and union activists. But also present were thousands of workers and young people looking for a means to fight the devastating assault on living standards and the impact of inflation running at 11 percent. On the day of the rally, the TUC released research showing that the average worker lost out on nearly £20,000 in real earnings between 2008 and 2021.

The bankrupt politics of the TUC was confirmed at the event’s closing rally held in Parliament Square. An amnesty was provided for Johnson’s political partners, the Labour Party. Suspended former leader Jeremy Corbyn was excluded and left an isolated figure wandering around the demonstration, having handed the party back to the Blairite right without a fight.

New leader Sir Keir Starmer had no intention of

appearing anywhere which might associate him in any way with strikes by the working class, but his deputy leader Angela Rayner and Tony Blair clone Wes Streeting were given opportunities for a photo op, including with TUC leader Frances O’Grady, while keeping their political distance by mutual agreement with the trade union bureaucracy.

The next day, Starmer, speaking at a conference of the Local Government Association Labour Group, declared that the rail strikes should be called off and blamed Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Transport Secretary Grant Shapps for fuelling the industrial action “so they can feed off the division.” He tweeted, “Time is running out. The Tories must get round the table and sort this out.”

One trade union bureaucrat after another—including figures such as Sharon Graham (Unite), Jo Grady (University and College Union), Dave Ward (Communication Workers Union) and Mark Serwotka (Public and Commercial Services Union), who have overseen hideous defeats of the working class—boasted of how well the unions have been doing. O’Grady herself applauded as another bureaucrat declared that Bank of England governor Andrew Bailey had no right to insist that workers not demand pay rises. But she sits on the Court of Directors of the Bank of England alongside Bailey.

The trade union leaders are riding an industrial tiger, with one after another threatening to organise strike ballots and industrial action “if required”. The latest unions to threaten action include Unison, representing hundreds of thousands of National Health Service workers threatened with a 3 percent pay award, and the National Education Union (NEU), with 450,000 members.

Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) leader

Mick Lynch spent last week trying to negotiate an end to the national rail dispute, including writing a begging letter appealing for talks with the government “without any pre-conditions”. But he is well aware of the militant sentiment among his members and more broadly in the working class, telling the rally, “If your conditions are being attacked, if your pay is being attacked, if your jobs are being stripped from you, you are in a class struggle.

“There is no compromise that has been given to us and the message is clear: we are in a class struggle now.”

Lynch concluded, “We will keep this strike going until we get a settlement. The campaign is on. The fight is on. The struggle is on... This is the fight of our lives, victory to the RMT.”

On Sunday, the *Financial Times* published an article, “Government unnerved by looming wave of UK industrial action”, quoting a “cabinet minister” who “said the government was walking a ‘delicate tightrope’ of keeping pay down and avoiding an inflationary wage spiral without forcing multiple sectors on strike: ‘If we get this wrong, we risk going into a de facto general strike that will create further turmoil that risks grinding the whole economy to a halt.’”

However, pledges by trade union leaders to organise a fightback are a form of pre-emptive action by the industrial police of the ruling class seeking to suppress a rising tide of social unrest—even if this means organising limited forms of strike action like the RMT.

The main cheerleaders for the bureaucracy are the parties of the pseudo-left, whose membership comprises a significant layer of union officialdom.

In response to Saturday’s rally, the Socialist Workers Party commented, “For the first time since 2018, all the major trade unions in Britain brought hundreds—if not thousands—of their members to march in blocs... It showed the unions can still be a real force and can mobilise on the streets when they try.

“For many people, the size of the march—and the fact that it brought people from across the union movement—showed them that a united fight is possible.”

The SWP offers up fairy tales. The trade unions have acted for decades to *divide, isolate* and betray workers’ struggles, imposing an unbroken series of defeats

stretching back almost four decades to the 1984-85 miners’ strike. That period is coming to an end, amid an explosion of class struggle. But the necessary unified struggle to bring down the Johnson government that millions of workers want to happen must be fought for independently of and against the trade union bureaucrats.

The way forward for the working class is centred on the fight to establish rank-and-file-committees in every workplace and at the heart of every struggle. As the statement of the Socialist Equality Party distributed at Saturday’s demonstration, “The British rail strike: Mobilise the entire working class against the Johnson government!”, makes clear, “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.”

For this purpose, the International Committee of the Fourth International founded in April 2021 the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We urge all workers to contact the SEP and join the IWA-RFC today.



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