

Lessons of the British rail strikes

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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After a week of determined action by tens of thousands of rail workers, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers Union (RMT) huddled back into talks Monday with Network Rail and the train operating companies.

Yesterday, RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch confirmed that all cuts remain on the table, including mandatory 7-day working, new grading structures, salaries and roles, lower pay and longer hours contracts, and massive attacks on the railways pension scheme. He issued a statement explaining that the employers “have taken an extremely hard line, we believe at the behest of the government in order to push through their agenda of £2 billion of cuts and what they call ‘Workforce Reform’.”

Yet RMT officials are continuing their fruitless negotiations with Network Rail and the train operating companies, complaining that government ministers should “be in the room”.

The Johnson government’s brutal agenda for workplace reform at all costs is crystal clear, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson declaring Sunday that there will be no return to “business as usual” and that mass closures of ticketing offices will proceed. Transport Secretary Grant Shapps denounces strikers for upholding “steam age working practices”, insisting the Thatcherite agenda for Great British Railways will be imposed.

The RMT has already signalled its willingness to reach an accommodation with the government. Its sole demands are for a below-inflation 7 percent pay deal and a commitment to no compulsory redundancies. But more than 2,900 railway jobs have already been destroyed in recent months via a union-endorsed “Voluntary Severance Scheme”.

It is necessary to draw a balance sheet of last week’s national strikes and the political lessons for the working class.

Spearhead of a working class offensive

Last week’s three-day strike by rail workers won massive public sympathy as the start of a fightback among millions of workers hit by the same cost-of-living crisis and who want to defeat the class war offensive of the Johnson government and the employers.

Strike ballots are underway this week of 40,000 BT telecoms workers, 115,000 postal workers and thousands of train drivers. British Airways ground staff will strike this summer, joining rail workers, refuse workers, bus drivers and barristers. Nurses, junior doctors, teachers and civil servants are calling for strikes. If brought together, these disputes would encompass three million

workers and lay the basis for a general strike to bring down the Johnson government.

Workers are entering battle as part of an international resurgence of class struggle. General strikes have taken place in Belgium, Italy and Greece. Mass strikes have erupted in Turkey and Spain, while pilots and other airline workers have struck across Europe. On every continent, the working class is launching collective action against soaring inflation and the impact of a pandemic that continues to claim lives. Governments are pouring billions into military budgets as they prepare direct military aggression against Russia and China that threatens to trigger World War III.

Ruthless state attacks

In his speech yesterday to military leaders, British Army General Sir Patrick Sanders declared that NATO’s war in Ukraine was Britain’s “1937 moment” and that all-out war against Russia must be prepared. The war effort would mean working now with “industry partners” to “make the Army more lethal and more effective, with better equipment in the hands of our soldiers at best speed. We can’t be lighting the factory furnaces across the nation on the eve of war; this effort must start now.”

War against Russia and China demands class war at home. The Johnson government’s determination to smash the rail strike is preparation for an all-out assault on the working class. Amid a raging economic crisis, the ruling class is determined not only to make workers pay for the war in Ukraine but the impact of a continuing pandemic, with workers left to foot the bill for multi-billion bailouts of the corporations and the super-rich.

It has tabled legislation that will create a scab agency workforce to break strikes. Anti-strike laws for “essential industries” are being drafted that will outlaw industrial action unless minimum service levels are met, effectively ending the right to strike in transport and other essential services. Similar legislation was used this week in Spain to ban strikes by Ryanair pilots, with the company boasting not a single service was halted.

State repression will not end there. An insight into discussions in ruling circles was provided by Liberal Democrat MP Munira Wilson who demanded on television Sunday that Johnson “should be working with the army and others to put contingency plans in place if the strikes are going to continue”, insisting “exceptional times call for exceptional measures”.

During the 1926 General Strike, Stanley Baldwin’s government

mobilised the entire British military against insurgent strikers. Guard battalions backed by cavalry and armoured trucks occupied docks. Troops occupied bus and transport depots. Battleships were deployed by the Royal Navy to Liverpool, Portsmouth, Hull, Cardiff and other cities, anchored within firing range of barricades. A 50,000-strong Civil Constabulary Reserve force drawn from army reservists and former soldiers was run by the War Office, alongside a reserve police force of 200,000, supporting an army of scabs prepared long in advance.

During the miners' strikes that rocked the Heath government in 1972 and 1974, sections of the military backed by the Royal Family laid plans for a military coup, with the army placed on high alert. In 1977, more than 10,000 Army, Navy and RAF personnel were drafted to break the national firemen's strike.

A general strike and the struggle against the TUC and Labour Party

During last week's strikes, the need for unified action was raised on pickets, including calls for a general strike. The main obstacles to realising this are not the hated Tories and their anti-strike legislation, but the Trades Union Congress and Labour Party. The trade union leaders are sitting on a powder keg. Their attacks on "greedy employers" and threats of future strikes are pitched at placating workers' own mounting anger. But in practice, they are suppressing and delaying action, holding strike ballots at staggered intervals while they seek a *modus vivendi* with the government.

On the eve of the rail strikes the TUC coordinated a letter from the UK's 14 largest unions including Unite, the GMB, Unison and the CWU, begging the government to "get round the table with unions and employers". TUC President Frances O'Grady urged on Monday that Shapps "needs to stop inflaming tensions" and negotiate with unions for a "fair resolution"—one which the Tories have no intention of offering.

Amid what the ruling class has dubbed a "summer of discontent", not a single major strike has taken place this week. Rail strikes have been shelved, including on the London Underground where strike mandates are being sat on, even as Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan proceeds with a slash-and-burn agenda against the entire transport system.

The rail strikes have exposed the vicious right-wing character of the Labour Party, epitomised by its leader Sir Keir Starmer's threat that any MP visiting picket lines would be disciplined—an edict not even Tony Blair would have dared issue.

Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary David Lammy spoke for them all. Asked whether he would back strike action by Heathrow ground crew demanding restoration of a 10 percent pay cut imposed during the pandemic, Lammy replied "No, no, no!" He opposed the strikes, "because I'm serious about the business of being in Government."

The role of the RMT

Widespread support for rail workers has produced a wave of popular support for the RMT, considered a militant trade union, and for General Secretary Mick Lynch. His demolition of right-wing media personalities, including Piers Morgan, Kay Burley and Richard Madeley, and of Tory politicians, has been applauded.

But Lynch's political appeal, like that of the TUC, is pitched to the Tory government and employers. Their argument is that Johnson's efforts to replicate Thatcher's frontal assault on the National Union of Mineworkers during the 1984-85 strike is socially explosive and unnecessary. Lynch's appeal is that "any changes to structures, working practices, or conditions have to be agreed with our union, not imposed". Like its TUC counterparts, the RMT wants to retain its corporatist partnership with the rail bosses and the government.

The union has given the Johnson government more than a year to prepare its offensive against rail workers, participating in the Rail Industry Recovery Group initiated by Shapps along with the rail bosses since May 2021. They signed its Enabling Framework Agreement for massive cost savings centred on redundancies and the gutting of terms and conditions, safety and pensions.

At the RMT's rally on Saturday, Lynch declared his support for Sir Keir Starmer, "That's what we've got. He must win. We've got to push him and persuade him to get into a position where he's in the front rank with you, all of you." He is trying to channel social discontent behind a pro-war party no less hostile to the working class than the Tories. Rupert Murdoch's *Times* joined the acclaim for Lynch for this reason, ascribing his popularity to his "picking reasonableness over revolution".

The working class must intervene independently to assert its control over the dispute.

This means forming rank-and-file committees in every depot and workplace, opposing all attempts to restrict industrial action and expanding the strike to encompass all rail and transport workers and every section of the working class.

Conditions are emerging for a general strike to bring down the Johnson government and bring an end to pay cuts and deepening social inequality. But this means a political fight against the sabotage of the TUC and Labour who are *de facto* partners with the Tories.

A general strike in Britain will rapidly win the active support of workers across Europe and around the world. The answer of the working class to war, social inequality and the mounting attacks on democratic rights must be the fight for world socialism.



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