

Britain's strike wave escalates as millions push for action

Thomas Scripps
16 August 2022

Britain is experiencing a wave of strikes on a scale unseen for decades.

More than 40,000 rail workers represented by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) and Transport Salaried Staffs Association (TSSA) will continue national rail strikes on Thursday and Saturday. Around 10,000 RMT members on the London Underground and Overground will strike Friday, alongside 1,600 London United bus workers beginning two days of action.

In an action that will massively impact on the UK economy, 1,900 workers at the UK's Felixstowe port, responsible for half of all container freight, will begin eight days of strike action on Sunday. Over 500 workers have also voted to strike at the Port of Liverpool, Britain's fourth largest.

Close to 115,000 Royal Mail workers in the Communication Workers Union will strike on August 26 and 31 and September 8 and 9. Another 50,000 BT telecoms workers in the same union will strike August 30 and 31. Post Office workers will join on August 26, 27 and 30.

In a powerful confirmation of the angry and determined mood among workers, wildcat walkouts involving thousands have taken place at Amazon and are continuing fortnightly at subcontractors across the UK's vital energy infrastructure.

These strikes take place as workers across Europe and internationally are also taking significant industrial action. One-day general strikes have been held in Italy, Greece and Belgium. A wave of strikes has swept across Turkey, and major actions have been taken against some of Europe's biggest airlines, including a planned five months of strikes at Ryanair in Spain.

Workers are being driven into struggle by a catastrophic collapse in living standards comparable

only to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Wages in the UK, flatlining for over a decade, have fallen by a staggering 7 percent versus RPI inflation over the year to April-June, at the fastest rate on record. Two-thirds of households face a winter of fuel poverty, with average bills set to rise to £4,426 a year by next April. Millions are unable to even properly feed their families.

The growing mass movement brings the working class into a direct confrontation with trade unions working desperately to contain and sabotage their struggle and a Conservative government seeking to impose the full weight of the crisis on workers and their families by any means necessary, with the active collusion of the opposition Labour Party.

Over 200,000 workers are out on strike this month, but this would be closer to 3 million if the biggest battalions of the working class were not being deliberately demobilised by the trade union bureaucracy.

Over one million workers in the National Health Service and one million more in the education sector and in local government are being prevented from striking by an extended process of consultative ballots and by actual ballots delayed into the autumn and beyond.

This is being done deliberately, to avert a mobilisation that could topple the government. The unions know and fear this possibility, as was revealed by the comments of RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch and Aslef General Secretary Mick Whelan.

Both raised the subject of a general strike, only in order to insist that it was not in their power to organise one. Lynch told BBC *Newsnight* that only the Trades Union Congress (TUC) "can call a general strike, not me. If they call it we'll support it, absolutely." He did so knowing that the TUC would never make such a

call. In similar fashion Whelan told Sky News, “I don’t think it’s likely there’s going to be a general strike...”

Nevertheless, the fact that two trade union leaders feel it necessary to speak of a general strike is because this is already being discussed on picket lines and in workplaces up and down the country. Theirs is an attempt to placate popular anger over de facto pay cuts, thousands of job losses and speed ups.

The same political concerns underlie Lynch’s fronting of the new Enough is Enough campaign, launched by the Corbynite left of the Labour Party and the *Jacobin*-owned *Tribune*, with the RMT and the CWU the only trade union affiliates. Its demands are: “A real pay rise”, “Slash energy bills”, “End food poverty”, “Decent homes for all” and “Tax the rich”.

These are popular and necessary measures, but they require a frontal assault on capitalism and, above all, a political struggle against the Labour Party that the unions are desperate to prevent.

Even as Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer denounces strikes, threatens to expel his own MPs for joining picket lines and echoes Tory attacks on “magic money tree” reforms, Lynch and Whelan insist that he must be supported as the only alternative to the Tories and encouraged to “come off the fence”.

For the working class to wage a real fight in defence of its interests requires the formation of new organisations of struggle, independent of the trade unions. Rank-and-file committees, led democratically by the most trusted workers, must be built in every workplace and community to unify the struggles now erupting and prepare the conditions for a general strike.

In waging this struggle, the most important allies of workers in Britain are their brothers and sisters in Europe and internationally. They will be able to call on their support through the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Such a struggle cannot be confined to the industrial sphere. Many workers understand that they are not only fighting this or that employer, but a Tory government and a Labour Party acting together to impose the dictates of the major corporations, banks and the financial oligarchy.

The Tory leadership contest has seen Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak compete over who can lay out the most draconian plans for mass strikebreaking and the outright banning of strikes and protests. Measures to be

implemented from September include enforcing minimum service levels in all “critical industries and services”, banning strikes by different unions in the same workplace, delaying strikes with a “right to respond” time for the employer, scrapping the law allowing unions to use a strike mandate at any point in the next six months, and compulsory cooling-off periods after each strike, lasting up to 60 days.

With a few token criticisms, Labour will allow all these measures to be implemented and attack any workers who oppose them.

Through such ruthless measures the working class is being made to pay for the massive bailouts of big business during the pandemic and the staggering costs of the imperialist proxy war in Ukraine waged by the NATO powers while the corporations continue to rake in record profits.

Only a combined industrial and political offensive by the working class can defeat the trade unions’ efforts to suppress the growing strike movement and prevent any political challenge to the Tory government and Labour’s right-wing policies.

To expose and defeat the political conspirators in Westminster, the Socialist Equality Party has called on workers to demand an immediate general election.

Our aim is to mobilise the working class in opposition to the ruthless assault on living standards and democratic rights; the relentless escalation of the war against Russia, even to the point of risking a nuclear war; and the criminal refusal to end a pandemic and allow mass infection and death; and to build support for a socialist alternative to capitalism. We are confident that such a fight by the British working class, challenging the right of the parties of big business to rule, will be an inspiration to the struggles of workers throughout the world.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact