

How the trade unions suppressed the class struggle during UK's "Summer of Discontent"

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The suspension of rail and postal strikes following the death of Queen Elizabeth II underscores the central lesson of the UK's "summer of discontent": that the trade unions have become the chief mechanism for the suppression of the class struggle.

Two days after Liz Truss became prime minister and began assembling a right-wing cabinet pledged to criminalise strike action for broad swathes of the working class, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union (RMT) and the Communication Workers Union (CWU) led the way in announcing an end to all ongoing strikes for the whole month of September.

Delivering its "respects to Queen Elizabeth", the RMT cancelled two days of strikes planned for September 15 and 17. The CWU called off a two-day strike of postal workers then already underway "out of respect for her service to the country". The Royal College of Nursing even delayed a strike ballot of 300,000 nurses and said campaigning would "pause until further notice."

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) postponed its annual congress scheduled to begin September 11, happy to avoid scrutiny of its refusal to organise in defence of its now 5.5 million members.

The suspension of strike action is being justified by the queen's death, but her passing was a gift to a bureaucracy that is desperate to bring an end to the broadest wave of strikes in the UK in almost four decades. It leaves just two major strikes this month, on Liverpool and Felixstowe docks, with two one-day strikes by ASLEF—who represent train drivers—and one-day strikes by the RMT and CWU on October 1. This means that all planned strikes coalesce on that day.

The trade unions and the class struggle

At the start of this summer, trade unions were confronted with an explosive political situation. Class grievances suppressed for decades in which the trade unions have kept strikes to historic lows threatened to explode. Millions of workers were demanding industrial action as part of an international upsurge of strikes and protests driven by the worst collapse in incomes in living memory—eaten away by galloping inflation driven above all by the massive rise in energy and food cost due to NATO's war in Ukraine and sanctions against Russia. Millions of households are in fuel poverty, forced to skip meals and cannot pay their rent.

The trade unions faced this upsurge as organisations deeply

discredited by decades of sell-outs, viewed by many members as an arm of management in the workplace or as an irrelevance for the large majority of workers who are non-unionised. Last year was the lowest on record for union membership in Britain, accounting for just 23.1 percent of the workforce overall, only 12.8 percent in the private sector, 11.6 percent among those aged 20-24 and just 2.4 percent of 16-19-year-olds. The TUC has acknowledged that "the vast majority" of young people "hadn't heard the words 'trade union' and couldn't provide a definition."

Fearing that the unions would not be able to maintain their stranglehold on the working class, a desperate campaign was launched in the media and by the pseudo-left groups to boost these rotten organisations. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham and then RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch were declared the figureheads of a resurgent, fighting trade unionism. The Socialist Party announced in June that a "crucial stage" had been reached in the trade union movement, which was "moving on to the front foot through a growing strike wave against the cost-of-living crisis" and "providing leadership".

Against this mythmaking, the Socialist Equality Party insisted that the unions' role would not be "to lead the charge of a militant working class, but to head it off." Describing the state of the class struggle in the UK in April, the SEP explained, "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."

The SEP warned ahead of the national rail strike this June that "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", calling for "the development of powerful rank-and-file organisations controlled by the workers themselves."

These committees "would open a new road for the class struggle, in which trusted representatives of the working class would take the lead and defeat the efforts of the bureaucrats to sabotage every fightback." They would provide the basis for the organisation of a general strike aimed at sweeping the government from power.

Strikes suppressed

Throughout the summer the unions have divided, delayed and demobilised millions of workers. National strikes that have been called have been limited to one or two-day actions and mostly kept separate even when involving workers in the same industry, as with the strikes by the RMT, the train drivers' union ASLEF and the white-collar TSSA.

The biggest battalions of the working class in the UK, in health, education and local government, have all had their disputes strung out over interminable balloting processes designed to prevent a unified offensive. Struggles affecting practically every bus driver and refuse worker in the UK have been carved up into dozens of individual disputes. This has allowed overwhelmingly below-inflation pay deals to be imposed jointly by the unions, corporations and local government.

Publicly, the trade unions leaders have utilised militant phrases but only to insist that all they want is a negotiated settlement even if below the rate of inflation. Lynch spent weeks urging the Conservative government to stop blocking Network Rail and the train operating companies from reaching an agreement.

The gulf between union leaders' new found radical speechmaking and their determined efforts to control and suppress the class struggle reached its highest point at the end of July.

Throughout the summer, striking workers up and down the country were discussing the necessity to unite their struggles in a general strike against a hated Tory government. Lynch, in the eye of the storm, was forced to acknowledge this sentiment. He stated that he was personally in favour of a general strike, but that only the TUC had the power to call one. With Truss poised to become prime minister and threatening to make strikes and protests illegal, he declared on July 27 that her election by the Tory party would mark "a turn to the extreme right" that would meet "an enormous response from the trade union movement".

He continued, "I would be looking for a general strike if we can bring that off," adding, "we need coordinated and synchronised industrial action against what they're proposing."

Behind the scenes, Lynch was busy conspiring with Graham and other union leaders to formulate a resolution for the upcoming TUC congress that only called on it to organise "greater coordination" of ongoing strikes. TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady welcomed the fig leaf she had been offered, with the *Guardian* reporting, "She stressed that it was part of the TUC's core role to facilitate coordination between unions, but that there was no motion for a 'general strike' on the conference agenda as that was not the focus."

When Truss became prime minister, Lynch unceremoniously abandoned talk of a general strike and instead tweeted an appeal for her to "act in the national interest"!

Defending the TUC and the Labour Party

Alongside its efforts to contain opposition to the government and the employers, a core aim of the trade union bureaucracy has been to prevent the emergence of a political challenge to the Labour Party. In open support of the government's assault on the working class, party

leader Sir Keir Starmer has sunk to new depths, including threatening his own MPs with disciplinary action if they attend picket lines and then sacking his Shadow Transport Secretary Sam Tarry for doing so.

Aware of the widespread contempt among workers for Labour, some trade union leaders including Lynch and CWU leader Dave Ward launched the Enough is Enough campaign group. Its organisers insisted that the campaign be non-political and limit itself to generalised calls for "A real pay rise", "Slash energy bills", "End food poverty", "Decent homes for all" and "Tax the rich".

As the WSWs explained, no demand was made on the TUC for a general strike, let alone "the necessary call for workers to break free of the TUC's straitjacket and unify their struggles against the common enemy." The same amnesty was offered to Labour, with Lynch first insisting that "it's in our interests" that the party "do get in" before stressing, "I don't care if it's the Scottish National Party in power, I don't care if it's Plaid Cymru." He added in a publicity video for the campaign, "We want to kick the Labour Party into a position where they have to follow Enough is Enough. We want to make the TUC go there, we want the trade unions to go there, we want the Green Party to go there, we want the liberals to go there."

Soon after the launch of Enough is Enough, the TUC resurrected its own moribund We Demand Better campaign proposing essentially the same demands to be championed through "a mass lobby of MPs in London" where workers can "ask your MP to support a budget that delivers for working people" and with Lynch, et al on board.

The working class cannot take a step forward except by wresting control of their struggles from the TUC and the Labour Party—and their defenders.

With their support, the British ruling class is free to deepen its key role in the NATO-led war against Russia. It now has a prime minister who boasts that she would launch a nuclear strike against Russia, even though the result would be "global annihilation."

Imperialist war abroad demands class war at home, as workers are made to suffer a catastrophic fall in incomes and an unprecedented attack on democratic rights.

The SEP has called on workers to combine the fight for rank-and-file committees and the organisation of a general strike with the demand for an immediate general election "as a means for the working class to break through the conspiracy of both major parties, oppose their policies, and assert its independent social interests."

We explained, "Our call is directed to developing the industrial and political struggle of the working class against all the capitalist parties in Westminster."

Developing such a struggle is the urgent task of the next months, as winter hardships bite, the war in Ukraine escalates and the COVID-19 pandemic enters a likely resurgence. Under these circumstances the trade union bureaucracy will be unable to prevent a yet-more powerful explosion of the class struggle. But success for the working class requires the formation of a new and genuinely socialist leadership. We call on workers drawing the same conclusions to contact the SEP today.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact