

As UK strike wave grows: Break the grip of the trade union bureaucracy! For rank-and-file committees in every workplace!

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
28 September 2022

October marks the start of a new and intensifying stage of the class struggle against a Truss government that has declared war on the working class. Amid the deepest crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s, the Tories and Labour are marching in lockstep with demands for austerity and “sacrifice” to support escalating war against Russia that threatens World War III.

The strike wave suspended by the trade union bureaucracy in deference to 10 days of enforced “national mourning” for Queen Elizabeth II has resumed with renewed force.

Strikes by 115,000 postal workers and more than 40,000 rail workers resume this week, alongside 1,900 dockers in Felixstowe, the UK’s largest port, who join 500 striking Liverpool dock workers and engineers. 40,000 call centre workers and engineers at BT and its Openreach subsidiary will strike on October 6, 10, 20 and 24, while 4,000 lecturers and campus staff began 10 days of strikes across 31 colleges this week. Thousands of criminal barristers are out, and 19 days of strikes were announced Tuesday across Royal Mail Group’s network in October and November.

Millions of workers are demanding strike action to combat the highest inflation in 40 years. The pound has fallen to its lowest level on record with the Bank of England intervening Wednesday to prevent a meltdown in financial markets with pension funds reportedly on the brink of insolvency.

The working class faces a government of unprecedented savagery led by newly installed Prime Minister Liz Truss. Kwasi Kwarteng’s mini budget was a rampage by the financial oligarchy: tax cuts showered on the corporations and the super-rich to be paid by workers through the gutting of social spending.

The scale of the social catastrophe has no precedent since the Great Depression. It is not a question of “heat or eat” this winter as millions can do neither. The NHS and other charities are warning of a “humanitarian disaster”, including children dying from malnutrition in the world’s fifth richest economy.

The fundamental issue that must be confronted is the role of the trade unions in suppressing a unified industrial and political offensive that is needed to defeat the Tories’ class war onslaught.

Throughout the “summer of discontent” the rail, post and other unions ensured that strikes were divided. This strategy has continued into Autumn, with strike ballots stalled or timed for minimum impact. The unions’ role in suppressing action through stalling tactics and non-binding consultative ballots means 1 million NHS workers, 700,000 teachers and 150,000 civil servants are being blocked from joining this month’s strikes.

While Truss has announced plans to ban strikes in “essential services” and new laws to enforce endless balloting before industrial action can be called, the unions oppose any fight to take on and defeat the government. Instead, they are using existing anti-strike provisions to hold back millions of workers who want to fight. This Saturday’s “mega strike” is for one day only and is window dressing for the bureaucracy’s efforts to throttle a broader strike movement.

The government is a walking provocation against the working class. Yet Labour’s leader Sir Keir Starmer denounces strikes, bans his MPs from attending picket lines, and declares like Charles Dickens’s Thomas Gradgrind that there is “no magic money tree” and that workers must apply themselves through “hard graft”. He speaks for a Labour Party that has embraced the free-market dictums of Thatcher and Blair.

Starmer’s address to the Labour Party conference in which he brayed for “nation over party”, after singing “God Save the King,” is a warning to the working class. He told delegates that Labour would enforce “difficult choices” in “the national interest”, calling for “a true partnership between government, business and trade unions.” If Truss falls from office, Starmer will offer his services in a government of national unity with the Tories. The unions

will support this, just as they did in 1931 when Labour's Ramsay MacDonald formed a National Government with the Tories. Its bitter harvest was the Hungry Thirties, followed by World War II.

Under these conditions the trade union leaders, above all the "lefts", are playing *the* critical role for Britain's ruling class in preventing a political reckoning with the conspirators at Westminster, both Tory and Labour.

Last week, RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch and ASLEF General Secretary Mick Whelan entered talks with incoming Transport Secretary Anne-Marie Trevelyan over her government's plans to axe thousands of jobs and gut conditions, pensions and safety across the railways. Lynch told the BBC it was a "very pleasant meeting", adding "She enabled me to download into her, in effect, everything that is wrong with our transport system and the railways in particular."

Lynch said the meeting was "a good start"—this of a government preparing to crush strikes, denouncing rail workers as "the enemy within"! He conceded that Trevelyan offered nothing concrete: no reversal of its Great British Railways privatisation agenda, or of its plans to tear up employment contracts. Lynch made clear the RMT's priority is to extract an agreement "allowing the companies to negotiate freely, on a free collective bargaining basis." The RMT wants only to retain its corporatist partnership forged over decades with the government, train operating companies (TOCs) and Network Rail. The rail unions are not seeking the defeat of the Tories' agenda, they want a seat at the table.

Over the summer, Lynch headed newly formed campaign group Enough is Enough, alongside Labour MPs Zarah Sultana and Ian Byrne. He insists the answer lies in the election of a Labour government under Starmer, corralling workers behind a party committed to austerity, mass poverty and war. The TUC's national demonstration on November 2 serves the same purpose, with attendees urged to lobby their MPs over the cost-of-living crisis they are enforcing.

There is growing recognition among workers that they face a decisive struggle against the Truss government and its mass looting operation on behalf of the energy companies and other financial parasites. Truss and her cabinet of Thatcherite lunatics are seen as an illegitimate government that has been imposed on the country by 80,000 Tory pensioners and other reactionaries.

Since last week's budget, the hashtag #GeneralElectionNow has been trending on social media. Calls are growing for a general strike. Millions of workers recognise they cannot live in the old way and that collective action is needed to defeat the government and the financial

oligarchy which it defends. This sentiment must now find conscious organisational and political expression.

Workers must take control of their own struggle. This means breaking the suffocating grip of the labour and trade union bureaucracy and forming rank-and-file committees in every workplace. Such committees will provide a vehicle for workers to reach across the divisions being imposed and develop a fightback across industry sectors and national borders, uniting every section of the working class against a government determined to impose the full brunt of the capitalist crisis on their backs.

The working class has been politically disenfranchised. This must be tackled head on through the construction of a mass socialist party of the working class. The Socialist Equality Party is calling for a general election. Our demand implies no support for the Labour Party. It is aimed at taking forward the independent political struggle of the working class and must be linked to the expansion of strikes and protests including the organisation of a general strike to advance the following socialist measures:

- * Nationalise the energy companies without compensation to wealthy shareholders. Seize their profits to provide low-cost energy for workers, the elderly and poor.

- * Cancel the war budget and redirect public money to the NHS!

- * Increase corporation tax to 80 percent and use the billions raised to fund social care, housing, public education, transport, welfare and the arts.

- * An immediate 50 percent pay increase for all workers to restore two decades of wage cuts, with future pay indexed to inflation.

We urge workers who agree with this to join and build the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)