UK Sunak government to ban strikes and protests

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The replacement as prime minister of Liz Truss with Rishi Sunak was carried out this week at the insistence of the financial oligarchy, whose main demand is that the government step up their attacks on the working class.

Truss was thrown out because her September mini budget of £45 billion in tax cuts for the richest was paid for with borrowing, rather than the immediate imposition of additional austerity. While her axing revealed differences between factions of the ruling Conservative Party over how to finance further vast subventions to the super-rich, there are none when it comes to imposing the necessary dictatorial measures required to enforce this.

Boris Johnson's 2019 election manifesto pledged to bring in Minimum Service Levels (MSLs) during transport strikes, which would make industrial action in the sector ineffective. Another policy aimed at neutering strikes, dating back to the 2015 Conservative election manifesto, was to legislate to allow agencies to supply temporary workers to cover workers taking industrial action.

The legislation on agency workers became law on July 21. At the same time legislation was passed to raise the level of maximum damages that courts can award against a trade union when strike action has been found "unlawful". For the largest unions, the maximum is now £1 million.

These laws went through even though Johnson had announced his resignation on July 7, prompting the leadership election that brought Truss to power.

Truss announced she would seek to legislate on MSLs within 30 days of taking office. The task now falls to Sunak, with the law to be enacted in early 2023.

The scale of the government's class war offensive is underscored by the Public Order Bill—one of the most draconian pieces of legislation in British history, effectively ending the right to protest and further clamping down on strikes.

The Bill has been used to revive sections of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 deemed so nakedly dictatorial they were voted down by the House of Lords. They include making it unlawful for a person to interfere with the use or operation of key national infrastructure, including airports, the road network, railways and newspaper printers. Effective industrial action in these sectors would be essentially illegalised.

Protests are deemed illegal if they include acts causing "serious disruption to two or more individuals, or to an organisation". "Serious disruption" includes "noise", meaning that any protest can be declared illegal.

Police are also granted massive new stop and search powers and the right to issue "Serious Disruption Prevention Orders" (SDPO). An SDPO can be imposed on people who have participated in at least two protests within a five-year period, whether or not they have been convicted of an offence. The person can be served a *two-year order* forbidding them from attending further protests.

Those handed an SDPO can be forced to wear an electronic tag to monitor their movements.

Jail sentences of up to 51 weeks are introduced for people who "lock on" to immovable objects or each other.

To impose this dictatorial assault, Sunak brought back as home secretary one of the most right-wing figures in the Tory party, Suella Braverman. This was just days after she was forced to stand down from the position for breaching the ministerial code.

Two days before Truss resigned, Braverman slipped through a last-minute amendment to the Public Order Bill allowing the home secretary of the day to apply for injunctions against anyone they deem "likely" to carry out protests that could cause "serious disruption" to "key national infrastructure", prevent access to "essential" goods or services, or have a "serious adverse effect on public safety".

In the final House of Commons vote on the Public Order Bill, before it was sent to the House of Lords second chamber for scrutiny, the government won with a majority of 49. Labour voted against only on the basis that the current repressive apparatus of the state was adequate to clamp down on protests. But Labour MP Sarah Jones boasted, "The Labour Party, last April, called for greater injunction powers

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following the disruption by Just Stop Oil… We suggested injunctions because they are more likely to prevent further disruption to, say, an oil terminal than more offences to criminalise conduct after it has taken place, with all the added costs and logistics of removal. Injunctions are more straightforward for the police, they have more safeguards as they are granted by a court, and they are future-proof when protesters change tactics."

With further protests held by environmental groups, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer warned of the repression he had lined up were Labour to take office. He told an LBC Radio phone-in show Monday that during his tenure (2008-2013) as director of public prosecutions, "we always had laws available" to prosecute people taking such action.

He added, "What we were pushing for in that was longer sentences for those who were gluing themselves to roads and motorways. We didn't get that through, but that's what I wanted." Asked by host Nick Ferrari, "And that's what you'd want in the future?", Starmer replied, "Yes."

The unions have done nothing to mobilise their millions of members against the legislation. The only response from the Trades Union Congress was a declaration from outgoing leader Frances O'Grady, "If ministers cross the road to pick a fight with us then we will meet them halfway… Read my lips: We will see you in court."

Among the key section of workers the legislation is aimed at suppressing are tens of thousands of rail staff, who have taken national strike action throughout the last few months. The Transport Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill sets the stage for mass firings, with the government stating that under it "specified workers who still take strike action will lose their protection from automatic unfair dismissal."

The main concern of ASLEF train drivers' union leader Mick Whelan was that the Minimum Services Level legislation "will only lead to industrial strife lasting longer." Whelan played down the dangers of the savage legislation and intentions of the Tory government, stating, "The government claims that similar legislation exists in other European countries, such as Germany, France, and Spain. Yes, it does, but what the government doesn't know—or doesn't choose to say—is that it is not enforced. Because they know it doesn't work."

This is false. Not only is such legislation used by these governments and others; even more draconian legislation has been used as the class struggle sharpens throughout Europe on a regular basis.

This year alone, striking Spanish airline workers and metal workers have been subjected to Minimum Service orders. This summer Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government and Ryanair imposed a minimum service requirement preventing many workers from legally stopping work. In the case of the metal workers' strike in Cantabria, 150 workers were banned from striking by the imposition of a 100 percent minimum service requirement in 12 companies.

This month the Macron government in France requisitioned striking refinery workers to force them back to work in order to break a powerful action hitting the arteries of the economy.

This offensive has accelerated over the last decade as the ruling class in Europe enforced brutal austerity to make workers pay for the 2008 global financial meltdown.

In December 2010, Spain's PSOE government forced 2,200 air traffic controllers back to work at gunpoint to smash a wildcat strike. Armed soldiers stood over them with the threat of immediate arrest should they stop work.

In January 2013, the New Democracy-led Greek coalition government, which included the social democratic PASOK and the Democratic Left, placed striking metro workers under martial law, forcing them back to work under pain of imprisonment. The following month, the coalition invoked emergency powers in the form of a "civil mobilisation," formally conscripting striking ferry workers into military service and ordering them to return to work.

The ruling class knows a new global economic crisis and new rounds of austerity can only be imposed on the working class by even more aggressive and violent means. Workers must be politically armed to face the class battles immediately ahead.

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