

UK trade union bureaucracy tries to sabotage mounting strike wave

Robert Stevens

27 December 2022

Britain's trade union bureaucracy is making desperate efforts to sabotage the fight of millions of workers against attacks by the employers and government on wages, conditions, pensions and jobs.

Last Friday, the GMB union called off a planned strike by thousands of ambulance workers, set to go ahead on December 28. This followed a successful strike last Wednesday of ambulance staff, including paramedics, technicians, emergency care assistants and call handlers at 10 of the 11 regional ambulance services in England and Wales. GMB, Unison and Unite union members are opposing a pay award imposed by the Conservative government of just 4 percent, with RPI inflation running at 14 percent.

The strike was called off without the government making a single concession, with the GMB citing overwhelming popular support as a reason! GMB national secretary Rachel Harrison declared, "We are overwhelmed by Wednesday's amazing public support for our paramedics and ambulance staff. People across the country have been wonderful in backing us and we care so much about them too.

"That's why we are suspending the proposed GMB industrial action on 28 December. We know the public will appreciate being able to enjoy Christmas without any additional anxiety. They support us and we support them."

The union leaders are terrified that such support could galvanise millions of workers who see in the attacks on National Health Service (NHS) workers a link between the fight to defend public health care and their own struggle to defend their livelihoods.

Harrison was so desperate to call off the strike altogether she told the *Guardian* that whereas the GMB's dispute with the government would only be resolved with a higher pay offer... any offer would be taken back to members for a vote. Harrison said: "What we are saying to the government is come to us, make us an offer, GMB members will vote on it. We are not making a specific demand. We would still like to see an inflation-busting offer and the restoration of decades' worth of lost wages, but if an offer is made, we will take that

back to our members to decide."

The GMB has not announced another strike by ambulance workers until January 11, giving the government more time to refine its strikebreaking operation, including the mobilisation of the armed forces and a soon-to-be-enacted raft of anti-strike legislation.

A defeat of the ambulance workers would deal a heavy blow to hundreds of thousands of NHS nurses who began a nationwide strike on December 15, followed by another stoppage December 20, despite desperate attempts by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and other health unions to prevent them.

The GMB's sabotage followed soon after the Communication Workers Union (CWU) announcing the end of a national strike by 40,000 telecom call centre workers at BT and engineers at Openreach. The CWU suspended rolling strike action which started in July after its eighth day on October 24 and entered closed-door negotiations with management.

On November 28, the CWU Executive Committee announced an agreement with the company with a strong recommendation to accept. It reneged on a mandated demand of 10 percent backdated to April, agreeing a de facto pay cut consisting of a flat rate increase of £1,500 not backdated to April but brought forward from 2023 and made payable from January in monthly payments. The deal sparked outrage among CWU members with many denouncing the deal on social media and quitting the union.

The BT sellout is a warning to the 115,000 postal workers in the CWU employed by Royal Mail, who have held 19 days of one and two-day strikes since the end of August to demand a pay increase, an end to attacks on working conditions and the withdrawal of a plan for 10,000 redundancies. The postal workers struggle was kept isolated from the BT strike.

The CWU has repeatedly stated that it would settle the postal dispute with a below inflation 9 percent pay deal. Prior to the two latest strike days—on December 23/4—the union offered to call them off to implement "a period of

calm” until January 16. It wanted only a promise from the company of no compulsory redundancies as the basis for further negotiations.

The CWU has announced no further strikes for 2023.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) union bureaucracy, assiduously promoted by pseudo-left groups, is seeking to end months of industrial action by 40,000 rail workers on the basis of a similar rotten deal.

Last week, the pro-government *Daily Telegraph* revealed that RMT leader “Mick Lynch has held secret talks with Network Rail bosses amid hopes that he will sue for peace in the New Year...”

According to the newspaper, “Lynch and his deputy Eddie Dempsey met Network Rail’s representatives in a hastily-arranged meeting on Tuesday morning [December 20].” It reported, “The meeting between the RMT and Network Rail... was arranged following a flurry of last-minute phone calls on Tuesday morning... It is understood that both sides have now agreed to a fresh round of negotiations in the second week of January.”

The third of the national strikes which have been ongoing for a month or more—that of 70,000 higher education workers—is being suppressed by the University and College Union (UCU) bureaucracy. UCU leader Jo Grady announced on December 15 that a decision by the union’s Higher Education Committee (HEC) to move to indefinite strike action would be thrown out. Grady unilaterally declared that the union would only sanction further token stoppages in “blocks” in February, March and April.

Five days later Grady issued a “strike strategy” document, explicitly based on ruling out an indefinite strike. It opposed another decision by the HEC for a marking boycott in January, stating, “A marking and assessment boycott intended to hit end of academic year summative assessment would be best timed to start no earlier than w/c 17 April”—almost four months away.

In response to the pathetic appeals of the union bureaucracy, the government insisted there would no concessions. *The Times* cited the response of Steve Barclay, the health and social care secretary, to the GMB calling off this week’s ambulance strike. Barclay “said the unions were launching a ‘de facto general strike’” by rescheduling action to January, denouncing the “unaffordable pay demands of unions.” Another minister, speaking anonymously, said, “effectively the unions are looking to hold the country to ransom. The government will be looking at stronger regulation early in the new year.”

The government’s main concern is that the union leaders will not be able to stem a growing movement of the working class, under conditions in which further strikes are underway with more set to go ahead in the New Year.

These include walkouts this week by Border Force workers at airports including Heathrow and Gatwick, Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) staff in several UK regions, and National Highways workers in the West Midlands and Southwest of England.

From January 3, rail workers in the RMT will begin several days of national strikes as a National Highways stoppage is also held nationwide. On January 5, thousands of train drivers in the ASLEF union will take national action.

On January 10, tens of thousands of teachers in the Educational Institute of Scotland will strike, along with members of the Scottish Secondary Teachers’ Association. On the same day ambulance drivers in Unison and the GMB will hold a nationwide stoppage, followed by another strike across London, Yorkshire, the North West, North East and South West on January 23.

On January 18 and 19, nurses in the RCN will strike in hospitals in London, eight UK regions, and at two NHS national employers (NHS Resolution and NHS Blood and Transplant). Further ambulance workers strikes, by Unison members, will be held January 11 and 23. Ambulance workers in the GMB will strike alongside them on January 11.

Workers confront not just a government set on crushing their strikes, but a trade union bureaucracy which stands four-square with the ruling elite. Their role is to suppress all demands for broader action against the government and dissipate every struggle.

Workers must turn to the formation of their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, operating independently of the union apparatus. We urge workers to contact the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to take forward this struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact