

New Trades Union Congress head offers partnership with UK Tory government to end strikes

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The newly appointed general secretary of Britain's Trades Union Congress (TUC) began his term in office by blitzing the media with interviews, offering the union bureaucracy's services in suppressing a still escalating wave of strikes.

Speaking to publications including the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* over the new year, amid fears in ruling circles that a general strike could develop in the UK, Paul Nowak warned that only an alliance between the unions, the employers and the government could prevent this.

Confident that this corporatist policy is already advocated by the Labour Party, he appealed to the ruling Conservatives to abandon a confrontational approach that was making it increasingly difficult to control the rising anger of the 5.5 million members of the TUC's affiliated unions.

The Times reported that "More than 1.4 million working days are estimated to have been lost in December. It was the highest monthly total since July 1989, when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister. Then, more than 2.4 million days were lost." But Nowak warned that worse is yet to come, telling the *Mirror* that a group of unions were considering "boycotting the pay process for 5.8 million public sector staff", with paramedics, nurses, junior doctors, teachers and firefighters fighting "two years' worth of pay disputes at once—if backlogged offers from 2022 are still not resolved."

Nowak explained, "It's not because union leaders are prepared to do it. It's because our members are telling us they've got no alternative. They can't afford another year of real-terms pay cuts."

"The solution lies in the hands of the government," he said.

In the *Guardian* he appealed to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to break with his "1980's playbook" on confronting the trade unions and work with them on an "exit strategy". He complained that the TUC "has had 'no contact' from Sunak or other senior ministers, despite working together during the pandemic. 'It seems a long way away from us being invited round for bacon butties with [former prime minister] Boris Johnson and his little dog. He didn't learn, and the government didn't learn, lessons about the value of working together to address a national crisis'."

Accompanying these appeals, Nowak reassured his intended audience that the TUC was seeking to prevent a general strike. The *Mirror* reported, "To Tories who say the strikes are a general strike in all but name, he shot back: 'Our members aren't interested in 'the general strike' or taking on the government... It's a completely red herring and it does a disservice to our unions and their members. I think they want to fight culture wars that our members aren't interested in.'"

All that the union bureaucracy wants from the government is some minimal face-saving concession that will give them an excuse to demobilise their members and impose yet deeper austerity without provoking a further eruption of class struggle.

The Telegraph boasted, "Nurses will have to back down on pay rise demands, union boss admits". Referring with barely disguised contempt to the official demand by the non-TUC affiliated Royal College of Nursing for a five percent pay rise above RPI inflation—an increase of 19 percent—Nowak "told Radio 4's Today programme the demand was not realistic..."

"There has got to be a landing zone somewhere between the four and five percent that the Government have offered and the 19 percent that some unions have claimed, but what is crucially important is that the Government actually sits down and negotiates..."

This was said on the day the TUC reported analysis showing UK workers have lost an average of £20,000 in real wages since 2008 in the longest real wage squeeze in modern history. This is an average of £1,450 a year, with nurses losing £3,000 a year and paramedics £4,000 a year. Average earnings are set to fall by a further £79 a month in real terms over 2023, and public sector pay by £100 a month.

The problem for Nowak is that the government has proved deaf to his entreaties, with Sunak announcing that "new tough laws" against strikes will be brought forward within the next two weeks. This will include mandating a minimum service during strikes in key sectors, including rail and potentially the National Health Service and education, and lengthening the notice unions must give employers of any action—all backed by £1 million fines.

Nowak described this as undermining "the fundamental right

to strike”. But he still pledged to cooperate if the law was passed, with only a legal challenge to be made at the European Court of Human Rights, and only “if necessary”. “Our unions will still find ways... to take effective action but we’ll challenge it legally and we’ll make them pay a high political price for it,” he told the FT.

Nothing will move the trade union bureaucrats to action, including the criminalisation of strikes. Noting that “The UK already has some of the most restrictive laws when it comes to workers taking industrial action,” Nowak dismissed calls to repeal bans on sympathy strikes imposed by Margaret Thatcher, telling the *Mirror*, “It’s not about going back to the 80s.”

In the Labour Party-supporting *Guardian* and the *Mirror*, Nowak waxed lyrical on the supposed benefits that Sir Keir Starmer could bring as prime minister. In so doing, he made clear that a Labour government would continue the austerity agenda of the Tories while relying on the trade unions to police working class resistance. In return he would demand nothing.

Nowak told the *Guardian* he understood that Labour will not be able “turn the taps on” for public spending if it wins the next election. “It’s not going to be able to fix our public services... because you’re undoing years of neglect.”

He was “cautiously supportive of Labour’s position ‘in the round’ on industrial action after some unions criticised Starmer over his reluctance to overtly back striking workers,” saying, “I recognise that Keir’s job is different to my job.”

This is a lie. The Labour and trade union bureaucracy operates as a unified force dedicated to the suppression of the class struggle in the service of the financial oligarchy, the major corporations and banks.

In our 2022 Congress resolution, “The escalating class struggle in Britain and the tasks of the Socialist Equality Party”, we explained how pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party seek to buttress the bureaucracy’s domination of the working class by promoting the idea that union leaderships can be made to act in workers’ interests through pressure from below:

“In every sector, the pseudo-left urge workers to call on the trade union bureaucracy, backed by so-called ‘union activists’, to escalate the industrial action which they inevitably demobilise, and unify strikes they seek to divide. Writing in 1929 on the ‘Errors of syndicalism’ and addressing the members of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Leon Trotsky explained:

In Britain, more than anywhere else, the state rests upon the back of the working class which constitutes the overwhelming majority of the population of the country. The mechanism is such that the bureaucracy is based directly on the workers, and the state indirectly, through the intermediary of the trade union bureaucracy...

[T]he Labour Party which, in Britain, the classic country of trade unions, is only a political transposition of the same trade union bureaucracy. The same leaders guide the trade unions, betray the General Strike, lead the electoral campaign and later on sit in the ministries. The Labour Party and the trade unions – these are not two principles, they are only a technical division of labour. Together they are the fundamental support of the domination of the British bourgeoisie. The latter cannot be overthrown without overthrowing the Labourite bureaucracy.

We advocated:

“The central task facing workers is to create the means to bring to bear their enormous social power in an industrial and political struggle for their own independent interests. The Socialist Equality Party advocates the building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, democratically accountable and led by trusted militants. These will enable workers to break through the policing operation of the union bureaucracy and unify their struggles in a general strike against the government and the employers...

The political perspective fought for by the SEP is that of socialist internationalism. The allies of British workers are the workers in Europe and worldwide already coming into struggle. We urge the affiliation of rank-and-file committees in the UK to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, so that the British working class can forge an alliance with workers throughout the world facing the same dangers.”

The resolution should be read by all those workers now in struggle and the necessary conclusions drawn.



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