

As trade unions seek end of UK strike wave: Socialist Workers Party attempts cover-up

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The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) claims in an article published December 20 that “Trade union leaders are moving towards calling a unified day of strikes that could involve over a million workers on Wednesday 1 February.”

The article by the SWP’s National Secretary Charlie Kimber is presented as an exclusive. It states, “The plan is another sign of just how much is changing—and the potential for powerful struggles to transform British politics.”

According to the SWP, the “plan” was devised in a meeting held the previous week by “senior figures from around 20 unions”. They “met to discuss whether some sort of joint action was possible. Those in the room included representatives from the CWU, PCS, NEU, NASUWT, Unison, GMB, Aslef and FBU unions.”

There is no mention of any such meeting in the national media. No union reportedly involved has mentioned it, neither has the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Even the most slavish bootlickers of the union bureaucracy in the pseudo-left Socialist Party report no such gathering.

The only meeting of national union leaders held in recent months was one hosted by the *Daily Mirror* newspaper at its London HQ in mid-December. Seven leaders from the main unions involved in Britain’s ongoing strike wave gathered in what the newspaper described as a “strike summit”. But aside from token rhetoric nothing came of it.

The event described by the SWP involved instead “senior figures from around 20 unions”, indicating it was likely a meeting of leading ostensibly “left” union bureaucrats, including those in and around the SWP and other pseudo-left groupings. The SWP names as its source a “senior union executive member who knows what happened”.

Whatever the form of the oh-so secret meeting, the SWP’s claims that any co-ordinated action will be organised by the trade union leaders, let alone a strike by over one million, were left in ruins by the first contact with reality.

While reporting that “Most of them [senior union officials] were for a one-day strike on 1 February,” the SWP then laid out all the reasons why such action was unlikely to go ahead. It said of some of the unions officials: “several are waiting for ballot results. The NEU [National Education Union] vote involving hundreds of thousands of teachers closes on 13 January. That’s just in time to give the 14 days’ notice demanded by anti-union laws for 1 February—if union officials moved quickly. The NASUWT teachers’ union vote in England and Wales ends on 9 January.” However, “the FBU firefighters’ union ballot continues until 30 January, so they won’t be called out on 1 February.”

To place further question marks over any action, the SWP reports comments from its source that “Everyone can see that there are important decisions coming. Will there be deals in the rail and the post, and can the nurses break through?

“Some of those who have been out a while feel they could do with a bit more support to get over the line and win something. *But most union leaders are also keen to have attention for their particular action so they*

are not sold on the idea of united strikes being the main way forward.” [emphasis added]

The supposed plan being hatched by a section of the trade union bureaucracy for a mass strike involving over a million is by now so hedged with caveats that the SWP’s “exclusive” consists of a suggestion by persons unknown at a meeting unspecified that was not accepted by many of those in attendance and beset with external “obstacles”.

That so transparent a fraud is given such prominent coverage can only be explained if the role and function of the SWP is understood.

The social make-up and political physiognomy of the SWP is of an organisation wholly in thrall to the trade union bureaucracy. Its own membership includes a significant section of union officialdom at a national, regional and local level. The SWP has spent decades promoting the bureaucracy with claims that this social stratum, conservative to its core, is a force which can be pressed to fight in the interests of workers.

On this basis, the SWP has spent decades securing a berth for itself within the apparatus of the unions and derives a significant portion of its income from this position.

Given that the assets of the trade unions now total over £2.5 billion, as recorded by the unions themselves through the Certification Office, preserving the authority of the trade union apparatus and preventing a genuine challenge to it by the working class is an existential issue for the SWP. This takes the form of insisting constantly that rank-and-file “pressure from below”, combined with efforts to capture official positions and build “left caucuses” with like-minded groupings and individuals, will transform the unions and force them to fight for the working class.

The SWP’s intimate ties with the union bureaucracy are, moreover, only one element of the party’s social base in a relatively more privileged petty-bourgeois layer, especially within academia, local government and the service sector. Squeezed by big business and facing a hostile Conservative government and Labour local authorities imposing massive cuts, they urge resistance from the working class, but fear this getting out of control and threatening the social and political relations from which they benefit.

Leading figures within the SWP, including Alex Callinicos, who recently retired from his position as Professor of European Studies at King’s College London, lead comfortable lives, with those in the trade union bureaucracy very well aware of the “threat from below.” For this reason the SWP combines militant and occasionally socialist rhetoric with a deeply conservative practice of policing social discontent, opposing any revolutionary challenge to a Labour and trade union bureaucracy they insist is the natural leadership of a working class that is incapable of rising beyond “reformist consciousness.”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented, far from organising any joint offensive by the working class against the Tory government and employers, the union bureaucracy is intent on rapidly shutting down every major struggle by workers. This explains the SWP’s cautionary note: “But the union leaders’ vision is still very slow and narrow. Left to themselves, it will be largely passive and the end of a process rather than a

beginning.”

This is an extraordinary statement. The “process” is never defined but can only be the most obscure reference possible to the intended betrayal of the UK strike wave by the bureaucracy.

This does not give the SWP pause in its efforts to attribute a possible radical turn to the union apparatus. It even provides a cover for Jo Grady, leader of the University and College Union (UCU), who is playing a central role in the suppression of a national strike by 70,000 higher education workers.

The SWP’s article on the phantom plan for a mass strike in February explains, “The union leaders last week agreed to reconvene on 10 January when a final decision could be made. There are discussions about the date. UCU leader Jo Grady told the union’s members this week, ‘It is possible that TUC co-ordinated action may be called in the first week of February (w/c 6 February)’”.

This sentence is linked to a tweet put out by the UCU which publicises a document introduced by Grady titled, “2023 winning the dispute: strike action strategy”. Containing the quote, it was issued on the same day as the SWP article was published. Far from proposing any joint action by the unions, the UCU’s document is explicitly based on ruling out an escalation of industrial action by 70,000 university workers. It centres on rejecting an “indefinite strike” in February voted for by the union’s Higher Education Committee (HEC) in November.

The UCU tweet met with hostility from higher education workers whose replies included, “It seems the same strategy that hasn’t worked for the last 3 years or so”; “that strategy doesn’t work” and “you are only publicising this one strategy, which happens to be one individual’s personal opinion... Doesn’t seem very ‘democratic to me...’”, “When are you going to share the other plan, the one that won the debate and the vote at November’s HEC?”, “The strategy you’ve been using for years? The same one that you’d be forgiven for thinking was written by the employers themselves? Do you people understand what striking is for? This is class warfare...”

The dissembling by the SWP is staggering. In the previous week’s edition of *Socialist Worker* (December 13), it published an article, “Resist Jo Grady’s attempt to undermine university strikes and union democracy”. It noted that “The UCU union’s higher education committee has already backed an all-out strike,” before declaring that the UCU leadership had “moved to betray its members and trample on union democracy”.

This was in response to Grady posting a Twitter video in which she declared, “An all-out strike in February could not only split our membership at a time when we need unity, but also play in the hands of the employer who wants to see us crash and burn not build towards a victory.” Instead, the union would only sanction further token stoppages in “blocks” in February, March and April.

It is no surprise that the SWP swiftly junked its criticism of Grady, given its central role in securing her ascent to the summit of the union’s apparatus via the UCU Left caucus which it politically dominates.

Following a mass rebellion in 2018 by UCU members, Grady’s predecessor Sally Hunt, who authored a rotten sell-out of a national strike over pensions that year, was forced to step down. The UCU Left initially backed Jo McNeill, a Labour Party member, as its candidate for general secretary. However, when Grady secured 64 percent of the vote in the second round of counting, the UCU Left shifted their backing and toasted her victory, writing, “Union takes a leap to the left... UCU Left look forward to working with Jo Grady to transform UCU into a democratic fighting union that can send shivers down the spine of every employer.”

The SWP has refused to oppose Grady and call for her removal, even though the union’s Higher Education Committee (HEC) and its Further Education Committee (FEC) are dominated by the UCU Left. On March 7, the UCU Left, after having fielded candidates in 21 positions in the

union’s leadership elections, wrote that it had achieved “some excellent results” in standing for positions on the HEC/FEC bodies. “Our candidates did extremely well in general, winning about half the seats up for election. These results should mean that the left is in a majority on both the FEC and HEC.”

The SWP knows on which side its bread is buttered and that means no genuine struggle against Grady can be tolerated.

The working class is viewed by the SWP as a dangerous mass which must be kept in check and above all remain faithful dues payers to the unions on which their own comfortable lifestyles often depend. In its accounts return to August 2021, the UCU alone reported income from members’ dues of £22.1 million. Of this more than half (£11.9 million) made its way into the pockets of the union bureaucracy in remuneration and expenses.

Coinciding with the strike wave of the last months, the SWP has published a three-part series with the first headlined, “A new activist’s guide to strikes, unions and struggle”. Its purpose was to provide a crash course in pseudo-left politics, and to preach above all subservience to the union bureaucracy. Among the invaluable questions that workers were queuing up to hear the answers to were, “What’s a picket line?”, “What is solidarity?”, “What is an indefinite strike?”, “What are coordinated strikes?” and “What is the TUC?”

A litany of dos and don’ts is aimed at ensuring workers never question the inviolability of the corporatist trade union apparatus. To the question “What’s rank and file organisation?”, the SWP answers, “The failures of the bureaucracy mean workers have sometimes organised networks of ordinary union members to pressure the officials and sometimes to act - independently of them. This is what we mean by rank and file organisation.”

The main lesson of Britain’s strike wave—part of a growing offensive of the international working class—is that, to mount a successful fightback, workers must coordinate their struggles independently of and in a political rebellion against the corporatist union bureaucracy. To facilitate this development, the International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties has formed the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Its founding statement explains, “The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance.”

In this struggle, the working class will face constant attempts at political sabotage by pseudo-left groups such as the SWP, who preach passivity and restraint as the union bureaucracy’s last line of defence.



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