UK government announces new anti-strike laws for education, health, transport, and other workers

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The UK government is proceeding with its authoritarian crackdown on workers' right to strike. Ministers intend to use the legislation to ram through pay cuts, job losses and speed-ups, amid the biggest fall in living standards in generations, to fund increased corporate profits and a surge in military spending.

Before Christmas, the ruling Conservative Party announced plans to introduce minimum service levels (MSLs) on the railways, requiring a certain number of employees to stay on the job during a strike. On Thursday, the government announced this frontal assault on democratic rights will be extended to workers in eight sectors, including teachers and nurses.

Fire, ambulance and rail services will have a minimum safety level enforced by the government, after a meaningless "consultation". Other health and transport services, plus the education, border security and nuclear decommissioning sectors, will have minimum staffing levels enforced if a "voluntary" agreement cannot be reached with trade unions. This is a round-about way of saying minimum service levels will be compulsory here also.

The legislation is expected to be moved in parliament "in the coming weeks." It directly targets those sections of workers engaged in or planning large national strikes.

In the same statement, the government invited the public sector unions to direct talks on pay deals for 2023-24—pointedly moving on from the massively below inflation 2022-23 deals being fought in the current disputes. It attacks "inflation-matching pay awards".

According to the statement, "Trade unions will be bound to follow this legislation and will risk the employer bringing an injunction to prevent the strike from taking place or seeking damages afterwards if they do not comply with their obligations." The Tories have already quadrupled the damages for failing to comply that can be levied against the largest unions to £1 million.

A front-page report in the *Times*, published the day the statement was released and in clear coordination with the government, revealed, "Employers would be able to sue unions, and union members who were told to work under the minimum service requirement but refused to do so could be dismissed."

A source told the paper, "This legislation will remove the legal immunity for strikes where unions fail to implement a minimum level of service. The strikes will be illegal. Ultimately people could be fired for breach of contract."

The *Times* reported that previously raised plans to increase the ballot threshold for industrial action could be "dropped in an attempt to streamline the legislation and speed up its passage through the Lords," but a final decision has not been made. Other measures including "doubling the minimum notice period for industrial action from 14 days and reducing the six-month limit for industrial action after a successful ballot" have also been floated.

Whatever its final form, the legislation is a major escalation in the class war being waged by the Tory government. This has global significance. Its statement specifically highlights "countries across the world such as France and Spain that already have minimum service agreements in place, to prevent large swathes of their economies being ground to a halt by industrial action."

Last October, striking French oil refinery workers were requisitioned on pain of a six-month jail sentence or £10,000 fine. The month before, Spanish Ryanair staff faced disciplinary action for walking out in defiance of minimum service laws in the airline industry.

Millions of workers will demand a mass, coordinated

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response to stop these plans in their tracks. But such a movement is precisely what the trade union bureaucracy wants to avoid at all costs. Aware they are sitting on a social powder keg they have tried to defuse through the sabotage and sellout of the last six months of strikes—including already ending a national strike by 40,000 telecoms workers—the union leaders' fear is that the government's announcement will set things ablaze.

Their determination to avoid a confrontation was paraded earlier this week in a series of interviews given by new head of the Trades Union Congress Paul Novak. He told the *Financial Times* that the only response to be mounted would be a "legal challenge". 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."

The closer the government comes to enacting its plans, the more desperately the union bureaucracy reaches out. Nowak chose the word "unworkable" to describe the new legislation, then repeated his invitation to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to "take up my offer to get around the table to improve this year's pay and end the current disputes."

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham called on Sunak to "step up to the plate, act as a leader and start negotiating." The GMB union declared itself "always ready to discuss". The Royal College of Nursing's Pat Cullen promised to "meet with ministers," pleading, "only negotiations on our dispute can avert the planned action this month." She and Unison Assistant General Secretary Jon Richards pledged to "look closely at what the government releases next week" and to be "examining these proposals and considering how to respond, including any appropriate legal challenge."

The Enough is Enough campaign, fronted by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union, Communication Workers Union and University and College Union revealed Thursday that a petition launched to protest the proposed minimum services legislation has been backed by more than 100,000 people. But despite the groundswell of opposition to the legislation and to a widely hated government enforcing it, Enough is Enough proposes no mass mobilisation of the working class—including calling immediate strikes—to fight it. It issued a press release declaring only, "Enough is Enough is planning to follow the petition with local meetings, rallies and protests across Britain in the coming weeks."

The union leaders' main appeal is for the Tories to rely on them to police and suppress the working class, rather than rely on state repression that will meet determined opposition. What they want is a corporatist arrangement, where sellout deals for workers are struck between employers, the government, and the unions in behind-closed-doors negotiations—with just enough fig leaves proffered to smooth their passage.

This is the policy advocated to the ruling class by Labour. Leader Sir Keir Starmer and Deputy Leader Angela Rayner were as one with the TUC's Nowak, with Rayner calling the government's proposals "unworkable and unserious."

Her comments followed Starmer's, "I don't think this legislation is going to work. I am pretty sure they have had an assessment that tells them that it is likely to make a bad situation worse."

In a speech Thursday setting out Labour's own right-wing plans for government, Starmer stated the common objective uniting Labour, the unions and the Tories, questioning whether the new laws would "bring an end to industrial disputes."

The Tories, however, feel they cannot rely on the union bureaucracy to act with sufficient determination against their members without cracking the whip. They intend to make the most of the bureaucracy's sabotage of the strike wave it currently leads, hoping to demoralise workers by sporadic, ineffectual, and uncoordinated action while galvanising sections of the middle class they hope will become frustrated with the disruption caused by industrial action with no clear plan for victory. This was the strategy pursued by their ideological mentor in the 1980s. They hope that defeats inflicted on the working class in this way will first bring an end to the strike wave and enable them to fight the next general election on a ticket of bringing "order" and stability.

Faced with this draconian agenda, two implacably anti-working-class parties, and a treacherous union bureaucracy, workers in every sector must urgently organise their own independent response through rank-and-file committees—democratically controlled by workers themselves and able to coordinate the necessary mass struggle against the government and its accomplices.

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