

Trades Union Congress general secretary writes “Dear Prime Minister” letter calling for talks to end UK strike wave

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The newly appointed general secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Paul Nowak, has followed his appeals in the media to partner with the Conservative government to end the escalating strike wave with a letter to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak.

The contemptible January 3 letter appealing for talks was sent immediately prior to the Sunak government announcing Thursday its intention to bring forward its long planned anti-strike legislation around minimum service provision within weeks. Legislation initially proposed against the rail strikes to “maintain a basic function and deliver minimum safety levels [MSLs]” will be extended throughout the public sector.

As well as rail services, MSLs will be enforced on firefighters and ambulance workers, and then across another five sectors. Workers in the public health sector, as well as in education, nuclear power, other transport services and border security will also be brought under the legislation. In these sectors over a million workers have already voted for strikes, taken part in strikes or are balloting for industrial action. A business department spokesperson said the government “expects to continue to reach voluntary agreements” with unions in those sectors and warned it would “look to consult on minimum safety levels should these voluntary positions not be agreed.”

In addition to £1 million fines against the unions if they defy minimum service levels, workers will face dismissal for refusing to be conscripted against their own strike action.

As the WSWs explained upon his taking office, Nowak made clear in a series of media interviews that the growing strike movement was not the result of union leaders’ intentions, but the refusal of workers to accept another year of real-terms pay cuts. The level of strike action in December reached 1.4 million days lost, the

highest since under the Thatcher government in July 1989.

Such an upturn in working-class resistance will be taken as a source of strength by the hundreds of thousands of postal, rail, bus and ambulance workers and nurses. But it is viewed with alarm by the head of the TUC, officially representing 5.5 million workers through affiliated trade unions. Nowak’s response is to offer the services of the TUC’s vast apparatus to quell the brewing revolt.

Nowak repudiated the popular sentiment animating workers’ determined to defeat the Tory government led by an unelected prime minister, dismissing speculation about an emerging general strike as a “disservice to our unions and members.”

Nowak speaks only for the bureaucracy, not the working class. He became TUC leader unopposed after serving as deputy general secretary since 2016 and is as much a product of an undemocratic process as Sunak. His predecessor Frances O’Grady retired from the post after nine years to take up her position in the unelected House of Lords as Baroness O’Grady of Upper Holloway. The salary package for the highest post in the trade union apparatus was £167,229, placing Nowak in at least the top 10 percent of the income bracket, rather than among the millions of workers that have suffered a £20,000 decline in average earnings since 2008.

The peace offering to the Sunak government is an appeal for an alliance to defend the interests of big business against the developing class struggle, with saccharine references to the distress of working people used cynically as window dressing.

In his letter calling for an urgent meeting, Nowak appeals for Sunak to “step up to the plate” describing a crisis in public services after years of “underfunding and understaffing.” But the fraud of his vague calls for a “fair

deal” for “people on the frontline” has already been exposed by Nowak’s dismissing the nurses’ demand for a pay rise 5 percent above inflation (19 percent) as “not realistic.”

His appeal is for the Tories to reinstate the role of the union bureaucracy in suppressing the working class through a tripartite arrangement with employers and the government. He wrote in his letter to Sunak, complaining that “so far your ministers have refused to negotiate directly about pay with unions.”

Nowak expressed concern that the actions of Sunak government risked “discrediting” the pay review bodies that have recommended uplifts of between 4 and 5 percent on nurses, other NHS staff, and teachers. These supposedly “independent” bodies have been used for more than a decade to impose austerity, levelling one miserly pay award after another against millions of public sector workers that have contributed to the largest squeeze on wages in history.

This machinery is so discredited that Nowak was forced to warn that some unions were considering boycotting the pay process this year for 5.8 million public sector staff. Over 20,000 fire fighters and control room staff across the UK are voting in a strike ballot closing January 30, which would be the first national strike since 2003. The Fire Brigades Union has attempted to forestall action since a pitiful 2 percent was tabled in May, organising a consultation ballot on the derisory revised offer of 5 percent that was rejected in mid-November by a 79 percent majority.

The degraded spectacle of Nowak going cap in hand to the Sunak government is the common response of the entire union bureaucracy, including those falsely portrayed as having a “left” leadership. The growing opposition of workers is exposing in a short space of time those who have been hailed since last summer as leading a return to fighting trade unions—none more so than Mick Lynch, general secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union.

Around 40,000 rail workers in the RMT are taking two 48-hour stoppages this week in their long running fight against the government’s £2 billion cost-cutting agenda, including pay restraint and a massive restructuring of terms and conditions at the expense of jobs and safety. ASLEF, the train drivers’ union, announced a one day stoppage between the RMT action. Even in the case of the most extensive stoppages of five days in a week across the network since strikes began last June, the division of workers is maintained by the bureaucracy.

Against this background Lynch engaged in a war of words with the government, complaining that it was blocking a negotiated settlement being reached between the RMT and the rail bosses. He penned his own “Dear Rishi” letter on December 9 in a plea to reopen talks after previous negotiations broke down. This was after government ministers insisted that the policy of Driver Only Operated, aimed at axing guards from the trains, be accepted across the remaining half of the rail passenger network.

Network Rail and the Rail Delivery Group demanded mass redundancies and other cost-cutting measures in return for a paltry two-year pay deal of 9 percent and 8 percent respectively. The follow up meeting with the rail bosses and Conservative Rail Minister Huw Merriman in mid-December showed that Lynch was prepared to accept their framework for any marginally improved offer. As Lynch stated to the BBC, it was not a case of making demands but a deal depended on “what can be generated through the savings and efficiencies they’re demanding.” Lynch stated in the RMT press release a day before this week’s action that the union had negotiated “successful negotiated settlements ever since privatisation in 1993,” such is the level of submission on offer.

The crucial lessons of Britain’s strike wave is that the only way a genuine and successful struggle can be waged against the government and the employers is by the working class wresting control of their struggles from the deadly grip of the union bureaucracy. Neither the worst cost of living crisis in four generations nor even the complete outlawing of strike action will make this ossified caste change course.

As is the case worldwide, the upsurge of the class struggle after four decades of its suppression by the corporatist union bureaucracies is bringing the elemental strivings of workers into conflict with employers, governments and the state which uphold the interests of the capitalist order. The key to unlocking the social power of the working class is the fight to build the International Workers Alliance for Rank and File Committees.



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