

Britain's trade unions attend government strike talks, desperate for a sellout

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Trade union leaders of national disputes in the health, education and rail sectors joined a day of talks with the Britain's Conservative government Monday.

Representatives of the Unite, Unison, GMB and Royal College of Nursing (RCN) unions met with health minister Steve Barclay; the National Education Union (NEU), ASCL and NASWUT with education minister Gillian Keegan; and ASLEF and the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union with transport secretary Huw Merriman.

To have even attended these talks shows the treacherous intentions of the union bureaucracy. In the same statement as it extended its invitation, the government announced plans for the swift implementation of widely expanded anti-strike laws—enforcing minimum service levels across the rail, health, education, border security and other sectors. These laws would cripple effective industrial action and leave workers who defy them facing the sack and even being sued.

On the eve of the talks, the *Observer* newspaper revealed that Prime Minister Rishi Sunak had been seriously considering plans to ban thousands of border force staff from joining a union, setting a precedent for other groups. It was reportedly decided against, for now, because it might be “difficult to justify” in court.

This is a government waging all-out war on the working class. Its day of talks was part of this offensive, intended to move the discussion to pay talks for the new year—leaving 2022's de facto cuts in place. Barclay set the tone on Saturday, writing in the *Daily Telegraph* that a “significant” pay increase for National Health Service (NHS) workers from April would depend on “productivity and efficiency” reforms in an organisation with 133,000 vacancies, deliberately brought to a state of near collapse.

A day earlier, the Rail Delivery Group proposed a 4 percent plus 4 percent pay deal for train drivers, covering 2022 and 2023, made contingent on enforced Sunday working, reduced training time for drivers, managers being allowed to move drivers from depot to depot, and other powers for the employers. In real terms, this is a 10 percent cut for 2022 (versus 14 percent annual RPI inflation) and will be well below the increased cost of living for 2023 as well—after three years of pay freezes.

Yet the trade unions uniformly shuffled cap-in-hand into Monday's talks proclaiming, in the words of the NEU's Mary Bousted, “Where there's life there's hope.”

A few hours later, they left the room in varying degrees of despondency and prostration. Unite's national lead officer Onay Kasab told the media, “Despite us showing up in good faith, the government have missed yet another opportunity to put this right.” He revealed the government had used the meeting to twist the knife and link its “productivity” reforms not even to a pay rise, but a one-off payment.

An RCN spokesperson said the meeting had been “bitterly disappointing.” A representative for the GMB called it “an insult to staff and the public.” Geoff Barton, head of the ASCL education union, lamented, “The meeting was constructive but largely unsatisfactory.”

Nothing else could have been expected. But the unions are desperate to find a way to end Britain's strike wave, which otherwise threatens to escalate in the coming weeks, with workers' determination to stop the fall in their living standards outlasting the union bureaucracy's attempts at delay.

More than 50,000 rail workers, 100,000 nurses, 120,000 postal workers, 70,000 higher education

workers, tens of thousands of Scottish school workers, and thousands of ambulance workers and civil servants are already engaged in live actions. Today, 45,000 junior doctors began balloting for a 72-hour walkout sometime in March, and ballot results will be announced tomorrow and next Monday for roughly three-quarters of a million school workers.

The needs of the working class and the plans of the government and the corporations are in such sharp conflict that a general strike is objectively posed to decide whose interests prevail. This terrifies the union bureaucracy, which exists to police sections of the working class on behalf of the employers.

The more widespread the strikes become, the more determined the unions are to close them down. As of today for national disputes, despite the militancy in the working class, Unison, Unite and GMB members are scattered across just two days of scheduled ambulance strikes; the RCN has two days of nurses strikes; and the Educational Institute of Scotland one day of primary school strikes and another of secondary schools. Action by 100,000 civil servants who voted to strike remains confined to a few departments involving a few thousand.

Not even the anti-strike laws have prompted a hint of resistance. Head of the Trades Union Congress Paul Nowak led the way last week in promising compliance while a legal challenge is mounted.

Amid the headshaking from union representatives after Monday's talks, Unison's Sara Gorton was more naked about the character of the unions' appeal to the government, praising a "very civil meeting" in which there was "definitely progress". Asked whether she felt Barclay was on the side of the unions, she responded, "You might interpret that."

It is already clear what sort of "progress" is being made. Head of the RCN Pat Cullen has said that she could "meet the government halfway" on pay and settle for 10 percent rather than the 19 percent set out in the union's ballot. Her public 9 percentage point retreat is the first of many doubtless already made behind closed doors.

The NEU is moving in the same direction, with the *Guardian* reporting, "It is understood that the NEU would be willing to talk seriously about an offer closer to 9%," down from its official demand for 12 percent.

ASLEF has only ever asked for a pay rise which

"puts a dent" in inflation. The RMT has already agreed below-inflation, strings attached deals at Transport for Wales and ScotRail.

At the end of last year, around 40,000 telecoms workers at BT and its subsidiary Openreach were sold out for a 3.8-8 percent pay deal by the Communication Workers Union—not backdated as insisted on by the workforce and promised by the union.

This and worse will be the fate of the hundreds of thousands of workers set to be on strike in the coming months if they do not wrest the leadership of their struggles from the bureaucracy which controls the unions.

Doing so is a burning necessity. The trade unions are selling the rank-and-file down the river amid an excruciating cost-of-living crisis. Over half of NHS trusts are running or planning on setting up foodbanks for their staff. Teachers are so poorly paid and overworked that a third of those who qualified in the last 10 years have already left the profession.

The situation will be worse next year. According to a report by the Resolution Foundation, disposable incomes (after housing costs) for working-age families will fall by 3 percent in the financial year 2022-3 and 4 percent in 2023-4, leaving them £2,100 worse off. This is almost half as bad again as the fall in living standards after the 2008 financial crash. Only the richest 5 percent of households will see gains, reaping the rewards of increased interest payments on their investments.

Averting this social catastrophe will require a massive, coordinated fightback by all sections of the working class, in Britain and internationally. The trade union bureaucracy has proved itself a determined opponent of this struggle. The task must be taking up by the workers themselves, acting through rank-and-file committees formed in every workplace to organise the uncompromising defence of every job, condition, penny of pay and public service.



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