

# UK government brings anti-strike bill before Parliament

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Conservative government Business Secretary Grant Shapps introduced the first reading of its new anti-strike bill to parliament Tuesday. Its main aim is to impose minimum service levels (MSLs) on emergency service workers, the transport network and then later throughout the public sector. Given the Conservatives' still substantial working majority of 69, the Bill is expected to pass later in the year.

The law will apply in England, Scotland and Wales, with Northern Ireland the only part of the UK exempt.

The Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill will allow the government to impose MSLs on six sectors of the public and private sector workforce in all the key industries. This would mean a significant proportion of workers (expected to be around 20 percent) across the economy would have to keep working during industrial action. The first three sectors to have the dictatorial measure imposed are the ambulance, fire and rail services. The legislation will then be imposed on workers throughout health, education, border security and nuclear decommissioning.

Under the new laws, the business secretary of the day will be able to unilaterally decide statutory minimum service levels throughout the public sector in the event of a strike being called.

The Bill will contain powers to sack workers who refuse to abide by MSLs during a strike. They will lose current employment protections forbidding dismissal during legal industrial action. Both trade unions and their members can be sued by private companies if they defy the legislation.

Shapps stated that the measures would be introduced and then broadened out via a favoured mechanism of the ruling class: "consultation". He declared, "we intend to consult on what an adequate level of coverage looks like in fire, ambulance, and rail services. For the

other sectors covered in the Bill, we hope to reach minimum service agreements so that we do not have to use the powers—sectors will be able to come to that position, just as the nurses have done in recent strikes."

This voluntary element is bogus, as the government has already made clear the legislation will be imposed if not agreed by the trade unions.

Shapps cynically stated that MSLs were required to keep the population safe during industrial action, referring to them repeatedly as "Minimum Safety Levels." He asserted, "The new ambulance strike [beginning Wednesday] will result in patchy emergency care for the British people—and this cannot continue", adding, "We do not want to use this legislation. But we must ensure the safety of the British public."

The reality is that the main threat to the health and welfare of the population is the ongoing destruction of the National Health Service by the Tory government. The health trade unions have provided cover during strikes, including during the first ambulance workers' strikes last month. No one died as a result of the strikes, unlike Tory cuts.

The measures outlined by Shapps are part of the turn in the ruling class internationally to authoritarian forms of rule, which has seen the outright banning of critical strikes, such as by the Biden administration in the US, and the frequent use of Minimum Services Levels in many countries.

Shapps told parliament, "The legislation will bring us in line with other modern European countries such as France, Spain, Italy and Germany, all of which already have these types of rules in place."

Giving a clear hint as to where the policy is headed once the MSL precedent is set, he added in reply to a Scottish National Party MP, "If we go beyond Europe, he will be interested to hear that in Australia, Canada

and many states in America, blue-light strikes, as we would call them, are banned entirely.”

Indicating the reliance of the ruling class on the trade union bureaucracy, Shapps namechecked the “International Labour Organisation—the guardian of workers’ rights around the world to which the [Trades Union Congress] itself subscribes,” which “says that minimum service levels are a proportionate way of balancing the right to strike with the need to protect the wider public.”

Tory MP Laura Farris said Shapps “could have added to that list South Africa, Argentina, Australia and Canada, all of which are members of the International Labour Organisation and have minimum service levels in essential services. In every single case, the ILO has reviewed the MSL and determined it to be a necessary and proportionate restriction of the article 11 right to strike.”

The opposition of the Labour Party—which has pledged to repeal the MSL legislation when in government—and the trade unions to the Bill is premised on the trade union bureaucracy’s proven role in suppressing every major struggle of the working class over the last four decades. To impose MSLs, they warned, would risk the class struggle breaking out of their control.

The unions have already allowed a battery of anti-strike legislation to pass, beginning with those of the Thatcher government (1979-91). These were all upheld to the letter by the Blair/Brown Labour governments (1997-2010.) Party leader Sir Keir Starmer’s pitch for government is that Labour, the unions and big business must work in partnership to impose the necessary austerity agenda against the working class, utilising the authoritarian raft of anti-strike legislation already on the books.

Deputy Labour leader Angela Rayner warned that “France and Spain ... which he claims have these laws on striking, lose vastly more strike days than Britain.”

In its statement the TUC complained that “the proposed legislation would make it harder for disputes to be resolve...” and warned that “minimum service levels prolong disputes and lead to more frequent strikes.”

TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak said, “If passed, this bill will prolong disputes and poison industrial relations—leading to more frequent strikes.”

Neither the TUC nor its affiliated unions representing 5.5 million workers proposes any strikes in opposition to the Bill. Nowak instead seeks to divert workers opposition into appealing to MPs to “do the right thing and reject this cynical ‘sack key workers bill’.”

Speaking last Friday, during the first of two more days of national strikes by members of his Rail, Maritime and Transport union, leader Mick Lynch—portrayed as a fighting militant by Britain’s pseudo-left groups—said, “What I think they’ll [the government] end up doing is making industrial disputes intractable, so we’ll have to resort to partial strikes, we’ll have to resort to works to rule, we’ll have to resort to overtime bans...”

Lynch was forced to make a pose of opposition, but the union’s campaign is based on pleas to Starmer, who instructed his shadow cabinet not to support picket lines on pain of disciplinary action.

Lynch stated, “We’ll fight them in Parliament. The Labour Party leadership have said they are going to oppose this and they’ll repeal it as soon as they can...We need to get a change of government and change of policy and then we need a new set of workers’ rights brought in as a priority [by Starmer after a general election in 2024!].

“We’ll oppose it in the courts and we’ll oppose on the streets as well. I don’t think we’ll get a general strike as people commonly understand it, but I definitely think we’re working towards getting coordinated industrial action across as many sectors as possible and across as many unions as possible.”

Lynch concluded that none of this had to happen if the government would only engage with the unions to end the strikes in talks this week, “We’re working for a settlement. We don’t want further strike action,” he said.



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