

Trades Union Congress rejects day of coordinated strikes against new UK anti-strike laws

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Britain's Trades Union Congress (TUC) has announced a "national right to strike day" of protests on February 1 against the Conservative government's proposed anti-strike laws. TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak said there were plans to "hold events across the country against this spiteful new bill—which is unworkable and almost certainly illegal."

He described the legislation as an attack on "the fundamental right to strike", introducing "draconian" restrictions which "will tilt the balance of power even more in favour of bad bosses and make it harder for people to win better pay and conditions."

But amid the largest strike wave in generations, with hundreds of thousands of workers engaged in industrial action and hundreds of thousands more returning ballots soon, the TUC will not organise coordinated action even for one day.

According to the *Guardian*, plans for a day of protests were "discussed by unions representing staff in the NHS [National Health Service], railways, education and civil service" at the TUC's London headquarters. But a suggestion of coordinated strikes "did not command enough support".

A union source told the paper, "One of the things that was seriously discussed at the meeting, which [some unions] were trying to get over the line, was a coordinated day of action on 1 February. However, that looks very, very, very unlikely to happen. But some unions will still go out together on 1 February as part of their rolling industrial action that's happening anyway."

The health unions played an openly despicable role. The *Guardian* writes that "Pat Cullen, the general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing [RCN], made clear her opposition to coordinated action by different unions and said the RCN would not join such a move." It goes on, "Officials in other unions said they feared that any concerted stoppage, involving massive disruption to a range of key public services, could reduce public support for the ongoing

campaign of strikes."

The pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party, with knowledge of the meeting through its members in the union bureaucracy, writes, "some of the health union leaders were strongest against a day of strikes. They feared that a 'general strike' would lose the 'special case' for the NHS and the 'pure reputation' of health workers."

Especially galling as their excuses are, Cullen and the health unions are only the most brazen expression of the whole bureaucracy's efforts to suppress the UK's strike wave.

Across the length of their months' long disputes, the rail unions, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and the University and College Union (UCU) have barely even overlapped strike days. The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT), ASLEF and TSSA rail unions have frequently called their members—all in the same industry—out on different days. The CWU kept its Post Office, Royal Mail, and BT disputes separate, selling out the BT strike last December. The Public and Commercial Services (PCS) Union has brought out just 5,000 of its 100,000 members mandated to strike, in a series of small, isolated actions.

Any union representatives at the TUC's meeting who pushed for a day of coordinated strikes did so not because they are closer to the workers or want to wage the class struggle, but because they are more worried about the consequences of being seen to do so little. As PCS leader Mark Serwotka warned his fellow bureaucrats at the TUC last October:

"I have made a number of speeches over the years saying that when history is written, the trade union movement will have been seen to have failed in fighting austerity, and we have to learn that lesson. And part of the lesson we have to learn, I think, is leaving individual battles to be fought on their own is a mistake."

On Wednesday evening the PCS became the first union to announce a one-day strike on February 1, in an effort to stem

the reputational damage suffered by the trade unions. It has, moreover, said that for the first time all 100,000 members eligible to strike will take part. A further 33,000 PCS members are presently balloting for strike action across five additional departments of the civil service.

There is every possibility that other unions could also announce strikes on February 1 as part of their ongoing rolling actions. But this will not extend into a broader initiative against the government. Most unions will limit themselves to taking part in a collection of protests as part of the bureaucracy's "legal and parliamentary" campaign against the anti-strike laws. Nowak and other union leaders have already promised to abide by the legislation, encouraging workers to wait for the courts or a Labour government they claim will revoke it.

The contradiction between the determination in the working class for a fight against the Tory government and the desperate desire of the union bureaucracy to prevent one is extreme.

The class struggle in Britain is at its highest level in decades. More working days were lost to strikes in the five months between June and October last year than in any similar period back to 1990, more than a million. Official figures are not yet available, but research firm Capital Economics and the trade unions both estimate that more than a million days were lost in December 2022 alone, the highest monthly figure since July 1989.

Meanwhile, the trade union bureaucracy has moved in the opposite direction. It is even more hostile to the struggle of the working class today than it was a decade ago. On November 30, 2011, up to two million public sector workers joined a one-day strike organised by 37 different trade unions against attacks on their pensions under the austerity regime of David Cameron's Conservative government.

What happened afterwards holds vitally important lessons for workers today. Billed by pseudo-left groups as the beginning of a revival of militant trade unionism, the November 2011 strike instead marked the beginning of the bureaucracy's final betrayal of the pensions dispute.

Within weeks, the TUC called off all future action and individual unions began entering negotiations to give the government what it wanted. By February 2012, only the National Union of Teachers (NUT), University and College Union (UCU), Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union and Educational Institute of Scotland (EiS) would agree to hold ballots for another joint day of action in March that year. When it came to it, the PCS and EiS pulled out, and the NUT and UCU restricted the action to London.

In today's vastly more explosive social conditions, the bureaucracy is so fearful of the class struggle getting out of its control that its betrayals are even more naked.

Its pseudo-left defenders are forced to work overtime producing apologies. On January 4, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in response to a *Socialist Worker* exclusive claiming the trade unions were planning "a unified day of strikes that could involve over a million workers on Wednesday 1 February." Noting the articles many caveats and the real actions being taken by the unions said to be involved, we named the supposed coordinated strike plan a fraud.

Of the SWP's caution about a union-led day of action, "Left to themselves, it will be largely passive and the end of a process rather than a beginning," we wrote, "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."

On January 6, the WSWs insisted that the trade unions would not fight the anti-strike laws, explaining that the TUC had "pre-emptively disowned any struggle against the legislation," with its lead "followed by the entire bureaucracy, including its nominally left and militant representatives."

The WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party have been proven correct. The union bureaucracy and its pseudo-left backers are leading the working class to what would be a bitter defeat.

For workers who recognise the urgent need for joint, all-out action in defiance of the government's anti-strike laws and in defence of pay, jobs and conditions, the task is to establish new organisations of struggle capable of doing this work in defiance of the union leaderships.

The SEP calls for the building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace, and, with its sister parties around the world, has founded the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to assist in this fight. Contact the IWA-RFC and the WSWs today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact