

Britain's trade unions promote future Labour government as answer to Tory anti-strike laws as they head towards statute books

Thomas Scripps
17 January 2023

The Conservative government's draconian anti-strike legislation passed its second reading in parliament yesterday as a few thousand people joined a protest organised by the trade unions outside Downing Street.

Moved by Business Secretary Grant Shapps, the Strikes Bill will enforce minimum service levels in the rail, health, education and other sectors—requiring a set number of workers, individually selected by the employers, to come into work on a strike day. Failure to do so will lead to workers being sacked, unions being fined enormous sums of money and the possibility of being sued for damages.

In the debate Monday, former Home Secretary Priti Patel fired the starting pistol on plans to extend these requirements throughout the working class, suggesting ministers should “look at widening the list of sectors where minimum service standards are needed”.

The Bill was opposed by Labour and other opposition parties.

Having pledged to repeal the law once in office, Labour speaks for sections of business concerned that the Tories' plans will lead to oppositional struggles in the working class breaking free from the control of the trade unions. Labour Party Deputy Leader Angela Rayner told the House, “It is the government, not the trade unions, who are acting militantly... What I would do is sit around the table and resolve this dispute with the trade unions. That would be better than what the Conservatives have done.”

The Scottish National Party's Alan Brown argued similarly, “Clearly the union asks cannot be too unreasonable, when RMT and ASLEF have agreed deals with ScotRail and the Scottish Government, deals in Wales and deals with Merseyrail”. Both have involved major sellouts on pay.

In its report, the *Financial Times* concluded with a

warning by head of the Recruitment and Employment Confederation Neil Carberry, who “said strike laws should aid to ‘channel and resolve’ conflicts. Otherwise, he said, they risked leading to ‘wildcat action, poorer service and the emergence of unaffiliated, more problematic groups than trade unions.’”

All parliamentary opposition to the Tory bill is based on such political considerations.

Outside the prime minister's official residence, the union bureaucracy's demonstration against the Bill was a pitch to the same concerns in ruling circles.

Beginning just minutes after the announcement of another series of nurses' strikes and new strikes involving 300,000 teachers, the rally was held under the auspices of the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union involved in an ongoing dispute. Such actions, and those of millions of other workers, would be effectively shut down by the anti-strike law. But speakers put forward no plans to fight the government's Bill.

A day of protests announced by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for February 1 was buttressed by an announced strike that day of teachers in England and Wales, joining 100,000 Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union members. The train drivers' union ASLEF; Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (train driver members); and the University and College Union has since also announced strikes for February 1. But strike action was lent nothing more than incidental significance. The central message at the Downing Street rally was that nothing could be done until a Labour government arrives to save the day—underscored by the presence of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and three MPs from the party's left rump.

Zarah Sultana announced that she would be voting against the law and that “thankfully a Labour Party that's

remembered what Labour stands for will also be voting against this Bill.” Taking up this lie, headline speaker RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch appealed to Labour’s front bench to say, “We are with you, we are going to defeat this law, we are going to defeat this government, we’re going to drive them out of power, we’re going to support you in your disputes, and we’re going to guarantee that you win those disputes, and when we win that election we’re going to repeal all the trade union laws.”

Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer, he went on breathlessly, should “come and stand with us... stand up for socialism, stand up for workers.”

Returning briefly from this parallel dimension, Lynch felt obliged to say that he would not be “waiting for professional politicians”, that “the future now is in our hands” and “the working class is back, and we’re going to fight for our rights.” But this is all demagogic.

Even the earlier claims by union leaders that the legislation could be legally challenged was effectively ditched by Sultana, who said the Bill would “will go to the courts where the struggle will only be held up ever so slightly,” adding that “it might be the only way to defeat this Bill is politically”.

The promissory note of a future Labour government is being used to fend off demands by workers for mass action now, even as the trade unions seek to end the ongoing disputes over pay, jobs and conditions.

Reports of negotiations in the rail dispute between the RMT and the train operating companies suggest a deal maxing out at a 10 percent pay rise spread over two years based, in Lynch’s words, on “what can be generated through the savings and efficiencies they’re demanding.”

According to the *Socialist Worker*, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) has told Royal Mail that it will not call further strikes of its 100,000-plus members until a new round of negotiations is completed next Friday. The site reports that union leaders feel agreements “not to cut certain premium payments” and for no compulsory redundancies are “a sign that they could soon get a deal.” It adds that premium payments are to come from money already allocated, which “could mean cuts elsewhere”, and won’t be offered to new starters.

CWU General Secretary Dave Ward sent his apologies to Monday’s Downing Street rally because he was in negotiations with the employers!

By the time a change of government takes place, the combination of government ruthlessness and the union bureaucracy’s rank betrayals amid an unprecedented cost-

of-living crisis will have produced a social nightmare for the working class.

And what should workers realistically expect of a Labour government? In his speech, Corbyn told the crowd “We have been here before. The Heath government in 1970 tried the same thing... And do you know what happened? Massive strike action all over the country. That government was defeated, and in its place, we [the Labour government of Harold Wilson] defeated that legislation and got instead a fairer system.”

Labour did repeal Heath’s 1971 Industrial Relations Act after being brought to power by a wave of strike action. But it replaced it with the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974, maintaining many of the earlier restrictions but with the active collusion of the trade unions. This and other betrayals carried out by the Wilson and James Callaghan governments disoriented the working class and paved the way for the election of the Tories under Margaret Thatcher in 1979.

Under today’s far more advanced conditions of social crisis, the process would be swifter and more brutal.

The fight against the anti-strike bill must begin now and must be waged against the Tory government, and the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy seeking to suppress such a struggle. To organise this counter-offensive, rank-and-file committees must be built in every workplace to unify the struggles of the working class in defiance of the new laws and for a general strike to topple their authors.

These committees can find political and organisational support in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which has led important battles against the union bureaucracy in the United States, exposing the sham elections of the United Auto Workers union and the shutdown of a national strike by the rail unions.

The fight against the anti-strike laws must become the foundational struggle not for a Labour government, but for a mass socialist party of the working class, the Socialist Equality Party.



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