

UK: A socialist strategy to defeat the anti-strike laws

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The fight against the new anti-strike laws must not be left in the hands of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and Britain's union leaders, or it will fail.

The TUC has not organised a single day of strike action against the greatest threat to workers' democratic rights ever mounted. The Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill would criminalise almost every industrial action currently being taken against the savage cuts of the Conservative government and the employers.

Yet no union—whose members could in future face mass sackings even for striking after a lawful ballot—has organised any industrial action against the Bill. Instead, several have shamefacedly coordinated ongoing disputes over pay, jobs and conditions, so that half a million workers are striking today while avoiding anything that could be accused of being a political strike by the government.

The organisers of today's actions—the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) and ASLEF rail unions, Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), University and College Union, National Education Union (NEU) and Educational Institute of Scotland—are far more concerned with abiding by existing anti-strike legislation than opposing the new laws, which will be on the statute books by this summer.

Moreover, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), Unison and the GMB health service members are not participating at all.

Instead, the unions continue frantic behind-closed-doors discussions, seeking to end the strike wave based on rotten below-inflation pay awards that do nothing to protect jobs and conditions, including the NEU's failed talks Monday to get its strike called off.

The RMT's Mick Lynch has only called out a small number of drivers while putting a final offer worth less than half the rate of inflation, and including substantial job losses and speed-ups, to train guards and station staff.

No further combined action is being proposed, other than by the NEU and PCS on March 15, budget day, with no reference to the anti-strike laws.

TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak and other union leaders have made clear that once the anti-strike legislation is passed, they will abide by its provisions to the letter, no matter the cost to the working class. All they offer from that moment on are reassurances that Sir Keir Starmer has pledged a future Labour government to repealing the legislation.

Starmer favours relying instead on organised collusion between Labour, the unions and the employers to repress the working class. He told the TUC conference last October he would establish an "Industrial Strategy Council" based on "a real partnership between Government, business and unions."

Opposing the Bill, Labour deputy leader Angela Rayner warned the government that, in France and Spain, where such anti-strike laws are in force, they "lose vastly more strike days than Britain."

Starmer's predecessors, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, kept all existing anti-union legislation in place, broke their promise to nationalise the railways and implemented policies no less right wing than the 1979-1997 Thatcher-Major Tory government. Starmer's Labour Party is every bit as hostile to the working class as its ideological mentors—he is committed to austerity and war, and a declared opponent of industrial action.

The unions are even claiming that divisions in the government can halt the anti-strike Bill, urging workers to appeal to Tory MPs! Lynch wrote in an email circular to RMT members, "some Tory MPs are beginning to waver... and have started to voice concerns about the Bill. We need to reach MPs... Let's split the Tory party on this Bill."

The Tories have brought in this legislation because they fear the trade unions will not be able to control the

working class under the blows of the savage assault now being planned. Threats of £1 million damages for unlawful strikes will be used by the union bureaucracy to insist that nothing can be done.

Not only must workers be made to pay for the billions handed over to the pandemic profiteers, and for an escalating world economic crisis, but this must be carried out under conditions in which the British, European and American working class is being dragged into a shooting war with Russia in Ukraine.

Battle tanks are already being sent by the US, UK, Germany and others. These will be followed by fighter jets and a no-fly zone, directly involving NATO troops. Tens of thousands are already stationed across northern and eastern Europe, including on Russia's borders in the Baltics.

War abroad means class war at home. There is no popular support for a NATO war against Russia and the inevitable growth of opposition must be suppressed. In addition, as leading military think tank the Royal United Services Institute declared, the massive costs of such a war can only be provided through the destruction of health and other essential social services, bringing an end to the post-World War II "peace dividend".

That is why the Tories are also moving legislation to criminalise political protest.

No section of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy can be trusted to oppose this. This includes Jeremy Corbyn—who offers nothing but endless platitudes about "solidarity" while refusing to oppose Starmer—and the handful of Labour lefts whose loyalty is first last and always to the pro-imperialist Labour Party, not the working class.

Workers must wage this fight themselves, in direct opposition to the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers to adopt a new programme of social and political struggle in defence of fundamental democratic rights and against austerity, the murderous policy of "forever COVID" and the drive to war.

Workers must take their fate into their own hands. We call for the building of rank-and-file committees that will operate independently of the trade union bureaucracy to plan common action among the broadest sections of the working class in a fight to mobilise the general strike to bring down the Tory government that so many workers are demanding.

This raises point blank the issue of what party will

replace them in government. Labour is no genuine alternative and is not seen as one by millions of workers. Faced with a possible general election, a frequent response is that there is no one to vote for.

Then a new party must be built that genuinely represents the working class!

A general election must be demanded. The Tories have no right to rule. In any election, SEP candidates will bring into the open the issues that underlie the present crisis and which the Tories and Labour conspire to bury under a mountain of pro-business, pro war propaganda. We will make the case for strikes, mass protests and the organisation of a general strike—to stop the war, force the adoption of a zero-COVID policy, and build support for a socialist alternative to capitalism.

Workers cannot oppose the offensive of the Tory government, which has the de facto support of all the opposition parties, without adopting an international strategy based on unifying workers all over the world against the savage cuts being imposed in every country and the existential threat of a Third World War fought with nuclear weapons.

British workers must reach out to the millions of French workers now protesting and striking against billions of euros in pension cuts and the raising the retirement age by the hated "president of the rich" Macron; workers in Belgium, Greece and Italy who have repeatedly mounted one-day general strikes, and others throughout Europe. This would forge an unstoppable force capable of taking on and defeating the warmongering governments and the global corporations, banks and the financial oligarchy they all serve.

Those who agree with this socialist perspective should join the SEP and take up this fight.



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