

Half a million UK workers strike

Robert Stevens
1 February 2023

Up to 500,000 workers took part in coordinated national strikes Wednesday, involving five major trade unions. It was the largest strike on a single day since November 30, 2011, when two million struck against Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition pensions cuts.

Around 300,000 teachers were on strike at 23,000 schools, (more than eight in 10 schools), called by the National Education Union (NEU). According to government figures, 51.7 percent of state-funded schools were partially closed or closed. Strikes also closed all 150 universities, due to action by 70,000 lecturers who are members of the University and College Union. This was the first of a planned 18 stoppages over the next two months.

Thousands of teachers in the Educational Institute of Scotland struck during the third week of rolling strikes.

Also striking were 100,000 civil servants, members of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS). Their stoppage hit Whitehall departments, regulators and other agencies, museums and jobcentres. It also hit border posts, with military personnel being drafted in by the government to check passports.

Rail travel was hard hit, with just a third of services running across the network, as 12,500 train driver members of the ASLEF and Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) unions took joint action.

The strikes were called to coincide with the passage through Parliament Monday of new anti-strike legislation, expected to be on the statute books by the summer. The Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill grants ministers powers to impose minimum service levels (MSLs) during strikes in key sectors of the economy. The first to be clamped down on will be rail strikes and “blue light” emergency services ambulance and fire/rescue. They will then apply to all strikes in the transport, health and education sector.

The main demonstration of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in London saw 40,000 march from Portland Place to Whitehall where a rally was held near Downing Street. Smaller rallies of between a few hundred and several

thousand were held in towns and cities, including Birmingham, Sheffield, Leeds, Bristol and Manchester.

The strikes and protests express the determination of millions of workers who are in a protracted struggle with a Conservative government and employers refusing to make any concessions. Among those attending a marches and rallies were firefighters who have just voted by huge majorities to strike for a pay rise.

At the London demonstration, Jack, a secondary school teacher, told the WSW, “I think the cuts in education funding have just crippled our entire workforce and pay has gone down across every subject. We can’t find enough teachers and it is a direct result of the Tory government. This is for children, because if they don’t have properly paid teachers, I don’t see how they are going to develop as they should. The children that are in school now have only ever experienced austerity, so I think it’s about time we tried to put a stop to that.”

Asked his thoughts on billions being spent on the war against Russia in Ukraine, teacher Jack said, “The Tory government is using the Ukraine war as a pretext to say, ‘we can’t fund this’, ‘we can’t fund that’, but these issues [education funding cuts] existed before the Ukraine war and will continue to exist after the war. It’s a symptom of how the UK has been ruled.”

Regarding the pledge by Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer to repeal in office the Strikes Bill, Jack said, “I think that if we plan on waiting on Keir Starmer to do something for workers, we will be waiting for a long time!”

The numbers striking and protesting would have been far larger if the unions had sought to mobilise the working class against the criminalization of strikes and the greatest threat to workers’ democratic rights ever mounted. The strikes workers took part in Wednesday were ongoing protests demanding a pay increase and in opposition to attacks on working conditions and pensions. Despite hundreds of thousands of National Health Service nurses and ambulance paramedics being involved in strikes in recent weeks, the health unions ensured that not a single NHS worker was involved in Wednesday’s action.

The Strikes Bill was introduced to Parliament on January 10, sailed through its second reading (January 16) and third reading (January 30) without a single strike being called. It is now in the House of Lords, passing its first reading on Tuesday.

The TUC sought to keep opposition to the Bill as low key as possible, even calling some of its “Protect the right to strike” rallies on Wednesday in pubs!

In line with its suppression of the class struggle the union bureaucracy has kept the campaign against the Bill limited to calling on MPs, including Tory MPs to oppose it. To this end TUC leader Paul Nowak handed in a petition against the Bill to Downing Street at the end of the London rally.

Far from calling any further industrial action, unions leaders pleaded with the government to come to a “reasonable”, below inflation pay deal that could be sold to their members. The day after holding last minute talks with the government in an attempt to avert Wednesday’s action, NEU joint general secretaries Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney issued the less-than rousing call, “Today, we put the education secretary on notice. She has until our next strike day for England, 28 February [a month away!], to change her stance.”

RMT leader Mick Lynch made his usual demagogic speech, declaring, “We are the working class, and we are back.” But he did so after agreeing to put a rotten sell-out deal to his 40,000 members in an attempt to end their strike.

Lynch knows that what the RMT and union bureaucracy are doing in suppressing a struggle against both main parties of the ruling elite is poles apart from the sentiment that exists in the working class. At the rally he made his most explicit attempt yet to channel workers anger behind the Labour Party, declaring of the Tory Party, “The issue is they are responsible for your poverty and they have got to solve it and if they’re not able to, they need to get out of the way now. Let’s get a general election on and let’s get a government [led by Starmer] that acts on behalf of our people.”

Lynch combines the occasional call for a one-day protest general strike against the MSL Bill with urging workers to lobby Tory MPs to vote against it, declaring this week, “We need to reach MPs... Let’s split the Tory party on this Bill.”

Lynch’s agenda is based on mobilising everyone but the working class, as articulated Monday evening at a public meeting alongside former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in his Islington North constituency.

He ~~was~~ enough lyrical is of the Enough because “in this thing that we’ve been doing, rolling this out, I’ve been into cathedrals, parish churches, temples, gurdwaras, mosques, town hall local community hubs like this...”

He declared of every political scoundrel, “We’ve got to mobilise everybody. Whether you’re a Scottish nationalist, a Welsh nationalist, a Liberal Democrat,”—and, in a disparaging swipe at his pseudo-left apologists, “a hardline socialist, whatever you are, from Never, Neverland.” Appealing directly for peace with Starmer and the Blairite right, he urged, “Let’s drop our divisions. Let’s drop out differences... Let’s get past the history that this movement is riddled with. We’ve got to find the ability to unite.”

The way forward for the working class is a rejection of the bankrupt politics of Lynch and every other faction of the Labour and union bureaucracy.

The Socialist Equality Party distributed its statement on the picket lines, “A socialist strategy to defeat the anti-strike laws,” in which we explained, “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...”

“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.”

We stressed that by reaching out to the millions of French workers now protesting against the hated “president of the rich” Macron and others throughout Europe, they can “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.”



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