

400,000 workers strike in the UK, tens of thousands rally in London

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Around 50,000 people took part in a national demonstration of striking workers in London on Wednesday.

School, university, and London Underground workers, plus junior doctors, assembled in Hyde Park before marching to Trafalgar Square. Government workers staged their own demonstration, gathering at Embankment before joining the main rally.

More protests were held in the UK's other main cities, with well-attended picket lines mounted across the country.

Over 400,000 workers were on strike, among them 200,000 teachers in the National Education Union (NEU) demanding an improved pay rise over the government's insulting 5 percent pay deal imposed last year—fully funded, not taken out of already overstretched school budgets. They are also fighting for an education system not blighted by chronic understaffing, overwork and plummeting teacher retention.

More than 100,000 government workers in the PCS union struck for a 10 percent pay rise against the 2 percent imposed last year. Around 70,000 junior doctors were out against a 3.5 percent pay award, pointing to a 26 percent decline in real wages since 2008. Another 70,000 university workers, members of the University and College Union (UCU) walked off the job to protest low pay, lack of job security and attacks on pensions.

The demonstration in London was lively and determined. Large numbers of workers turned out with home-made placards, with slogans like “I’m striking for my pupils—they deserve better”, “100 new teachers quit weekly—Pay up”, “Fund our children’s futures—Not your cronies’ finances”, “You gotta strike for your right to get paid”, “Missing: 26% of my salary—Last seen 2008”, “Doctors care—so make our pay fair”, “Claps don’t pay the bills”, “Overworked, undervalued, underpaid”, and “Cause of death: Bled dry—RIP teaching”.

The scenes gave a glimpse of the enormous militant sentiment in the working class which has been sat on by the trade union bureaucracy for the best part of a year. Wednesday was only the second day of large-scale coordinated industrial action since the UK's strike wave began last Summer, after half a million struck together in several sectors on February 1.

If all the workers with a live ballot were to be brought out in consistent coordinated strike action, then the hated Conservative government of the multi-hundred millionaire Rishi Sunak—which cannot even handle the tweets of a popular football pundit—would be brought to its knees. Instead, the rare days of mass action serve as interludes in a steady grinding down of workers' struggles by trade union leaders.

In the month-and-a-half between February 1 and this Wednesday, every health strike bar that of the junior doctors has been suspended by the Royal College of Nursing, Unite, the GMB and Unison to enter talks with the government—demobilising hundreds of thousands of workers. The TSSA union has settled its dispute with a sub-inflation pay deal forced on thousands of rail workers. The Rail, Maritime and Transport Union has suspended strike action by its 20,000 members at Network Rail.

Almost all industrial action in Scotland and Wales has been brought to a halt. The Educational Institute of Scotland cancelled action by tens of thousands of school workers two weeks ago to ballot on a below-inflation deal. Thousands of NEU members in Wales were prevented from joining Wednesday's action after the Welsh government offered a pay deal of 6.5 percent this year and 5 percent next, plus a 1.5 percent lump sum this year—substantially below inflation. The rail disputes have already been ended in sell-out deals in both nations, and health strikes buried in negotiations over similarly sub-inflation proposals.

The speeches at Wednesday's rally made clear that all

those unions still engaged in strike action are seeking similar sell-outs.

Joint General Secretary of the NEU Mary Bousted began proceedings by appealing to Tory education Secretary Gillian Keegan, “You are wasting weeks and weeks and weeks of time refusing to negotiate with the National Education Union, putting serious conditions in place before you will even begin talks.

“I wonder Gillian, do you have any idea how negotiations work? The Welsh Government understands, the Scottish government understands.”

She concluded, “Open the door and let’s start to negotiate.”

Fellow Joint General Secretary Kevin Courtney gave the closing speech and said likewise that the Tory government had to “look to Wales and to Scotland.”

Courtney summed up the general tone of the rally, pleading that the Tory government “has got to listen” to the “high moral purpose” of the NEU’s action. He raised several examples of years-long Tory voters supporting the strike, including a soldier 28 years in the Royal Marines, before calling on the crowd to “contact your MP tomorrow. I want every Tory MP in the country to be ringing the whips’ office... I want every Tory MP to be frightened by you contacting them.”

This is said of a government pursuing an unprecedented raft of authoritarian legislation targeting the right to strike and protest, and which has insisted that workers be made to pay the price of spiralling inflation rates. In keeping with the union bureaucracy’s abandonment of any fight against the government’s new anti-strikes law, it was mentioned only once in passing by Bousted: “They have to stop with the distractions, stop with the Minimum Service Levels [(Strikes) Bill].”

The unions are minimising the threat posed by the anti-strike legislation so that it does not serve as a spur to even greater militancy in the working class, making any remaining strikes more difficult to control. They are encouraging a bankrupt policy of waiting for a Labour government to repeal it.

Moreover, the strike took place on the day of the first full budget of the Sunak government since it came to office last year. The budget was the clearest confirmation that workers will be forced to endure low pay and attacks on their pensions and working conditions for years to come, as Chancellor Jeremy Hunt announced a further £11 billion in military spending over the next five years. This compares with the just £2 billion it would cost to award every junior doctors a pay rise of over 25 percent to

end the erosion of their pay going back over a decade. With Britain deeply embroiled in NATO’s war against Russian and intimately involved in US imperialism plans to confront China, Hunt’s initial billion are just a down payment, with every penny going towards the war machine to be clawed back from the hides of the working class.

More illusions were sown in Sir Keir Starmer’s right-wing, avidly pro-business, pro-war, and anti-working-class party at the rally, though few felt comfortable naming Labour directly in front of the crowd. UCU General Secretary Jo Grady asked the crowd, “Will you vote the Tories out when the time comes?” Paul Nowak, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), encouraged, “Let’s vote them out in the next election.”

Nowak spouted demagoguery about “This is what solidarity looks like, feels like,” concluding, “Let’s stand together, fight together, take action together. That’s how we win.” But the TUC—representing over five million workers in its affiliated unions—has organised nothing of the sort. Previous rhetoric from union leaders about a general strike is a thing of the past. Their policy is to encourage workers to appeal to the deaf ears of the Tory government while they wait for a like-for-like Labour replacement.

Many workers know they cannot win even their immediate demands on this basis, let alone reverse the decades-long erosion of their living standards. But they remain trapped within the framework of the trade union apparatus throttling their fight. Breaking out requires workers coming together to construct their own rank-and-file organisations of struggle in opposition to the union bureaucracy’s policy of holding a few limited isolated days of action, and then their cancellation altogether and the recommendation of sellout deals.

Workers must instead spread strikes through all sectors in a struggle to topple the Tory government and its Labour Party backers and implement pay and conditions based on workers’ needs, not the profits of the corporations and banks. The Socialist Equality Party and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees will lend every assistance to this urgent task.



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