

Tory anti-strikes bill passes latest vote as UK trade unions mount token protest

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The Conservative government's anti-strike Minimum Service Levels Bill took another step towards becoming law Monday evening. It forces a proportion of UK employees to work during a strike, denying them the basic right to withdraw their labour and sabotaging effective industrial action.

Currently targeting the rail, firefighting, health and education sectors and impacting one in five workers, the law could be extended to cover ever wider swathes of the workforce.

The Tories' large majority in the House of Commons is waving the strike bill through its parliamentary stages, but its smooth passage into law is being guaranteed by the lack of any organised opposition. This was underscored by the protest held by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Parliament Square during the vote.

A deliberately muted affair, upper estimates suggest it attracted just 600 people. The TUC excused this dismal showing by describing the event as an "emergency" protest, as if called at short notice. But the strikes law has been making its way through parliament for months. The TUC, formally representing 5.5 million workers, had ample opportunity to build a larger turnout, and enough notice to organise a major demonstration on the weekend.

Its refusal to do so was in keeping with the trade union bureaucracy's tame response to the law since its conception. A small protest of a few thousand was held outside Downing Street in January. Already active industrial disputes were cobbled together on February 1 to coincide with a TUC "day of protest" against the bill, designed to make a show of opposition while avoiding anything that could be accused of being a political strike by the government. Nothing more was done until this Monday.

The TUC and its affiliated unions do not want a mass movement to defeat the legislation. They appeal instead to civil rights groups, the House of Lords, and to concerned

Tories to vote with Labour, the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats to amend the legislation, while pushing for a future Labour government pledged to repeal it.

A mass movement on such a fundamental issue as the right to strike, at a time of deep social and economic crisis, would threaten big business, the imposition of savage austerity and the UK's key role in NATO's de facto war with Russia in Ukraine. It would test the trade unions' ability to police the class struggle to breaking point.

What the trade union bureaucracy wants from Labour is to re-establish the employer-union partnership upset by the Tories' ultra-confrontational approach, which they fear is provoking an uncontrollable movement in the working class.

Opening Monday's protest, TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak asked for a "commitment from Labour and every other opposition party: as soon as we have a change of government, we're going to repeal this legislation." He went on that "if" the Tory government would not deliver a "new deal for working people, we're going to make them pay the electoral price." It was with "absolute delight" that he introduced Labour MP Jo Stevens to speak to the protest.

Rail, Maritime and Transport union leader Mick Lynch, before selling out the strike against Network Rail and trying to do the same with the train operating companies dispute, previously spoke to audiences of tens of thousands and insisted "Enough is Enough". He told the few hundred assembled that he and the TUC were asking "Mr Starmer and the Labour Party, vote against this legislation... You must not only robustly oppose this bill; it must be repealed, and you must go on the record during this debate that it will be repealed in full within 100 days[!] of a Labour government being elected."

Nowak and Lynch implored Labour to "go further" and

implement a “bill of rights” for workers, with Lynch demanding it “repeal four decades of anti-trade union laws.”

Any mass audience of workers would wonder if they were hearing about the same Sir Keir Starmer and the same Labour Party that has banned its MPs from attending picket lines and threatened anyone criticising NATO with expulsion. The speakers are desperately trying to generate false hope in a proven enemy of the working class to encourage a passive response to one of the gravest anti-democratic assaults in recent British history.

National Education Union leader Kevin Courtney even asked, “How do we fight back?”, replying, “Well, I never thought I would say this on a trade union platform, but good for the House of Lords. They passed some amendments... If you know a Lord, talk to them, get them to vote it down again. If you know an MP, contact them; loads of letters on the TUC website that you can use.”

Inside the House of Commons, barely any Labour MPs turned up for the debate, with just 13 speaking as various amendments from the House of Lords went down to defeat. Those that did pitched their opposition to the “unnecessary” and inflammatory character of the law, citing the opposition of unions and employers alike.

Mike Amesbury worried the law would “make matters considerably worse in terms of industrial relations”, Rachael Maskell that it “could make things more difficult... Why is the Minister going against the employers, not just the trade unions?”

Sam Tarry called the bill “counterproductive, because the Government’s own analysis says that minimum service levels could lead to more strikes and more non-strike industrial action”—wildcat action outside of the restraining influence of the bureaucracy.

Deputy Leader Angela Rayner added to the list of valued critics of the law, “the rail industry; the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development; the CEO of the confederation of recruitment companies; the CEO of the NHS Confederation; President Biden’s labour Secretary; the International Labor Organisation; all UK trade unions; the TUC; the Welsh and Scottish Governments” and Tory MPs Stephan McPartland and Jacob Rees-Mogg!

Labour’s pledges to repeal the legislation are worthless. The Blair and Brown governments idolised by Starmer and his front bench kept all existing anti-union legislation in place during their time in office. And any Starmer government would be tasked with imposing an even more nakedly pro-business, anti-worker agenda under

conditions of a raging economic crisis and a war on European soil.

The same goes for the union leaders’ talk of “disobedience and defiance” once the law is on the books. Lynch pledged, “We will defy this law,” calling on the TUC to “commit to the same stance.” Nowak had said, “You might get this legislation on the statute books, but we will not stand by and let you sack one single nurse, one single paramedic... for exercising the right to strike.”

But if the union bureaucracy has mounted no serious struggle against the law before it reaches the statue books, why should anyone expect one once it has? Union leaders have instead spent the last months driving nails into the coffin of the UK’s cost-of-living strike wave, with hundreds of thousands of workers sold out, and hundreds of thousands more stranded in disputes frozen by the union leaders.

Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who has been expelled from the Parliamentary Labour Party, did not speak in the debate but made clear that he will not fight the ongoing betrayals of Starmer et al in a preacherly column in *Labour Outlook*. He politely urged “my colleagues from all parties” to defend democratic rights, and for the “labour movement” to “fight back”, putting forward “a vision that redistributes wealth and power in our workplaces and communities” in order to heal “today’s turbulent terrain and societal fractures” with the “politics of hope.”

The threat posed by the Tory strikes bill requires a mass mobilisation of the working class, organised independently of the union apparatus to topple the government, kill the bill and above all give impetus to the creation of a genuinely socialist party to fight for workers’ interests.



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