

# UK Trades Union Congress special conference signals no fight against Tory anti-strike laws

Tony Robson  
13 December 2023

A December 9 special congress of Britain's Trades Union Congress (TUC) confirmed that nothing serious will be done to oppose the Conservative government's implementation of its new anti-strike laws.

The TUC General Council's statement proposed no collective action by its 5.5 million members against the Strikes (Minimum Services Levels-MSLs) Act 2023, passed in July, one day after its first regulations came into force on the national rail network, in border security and ambulances services.

The Strikes Act outlaws effective strike action across six key areas of the public and private sectors, covering the ambulance, fire rescue, rail, health and education services, border security and nuclear commissioning. It covers 5.5 million workers, one in five of the UK workforce. The regulations allow for work notices to be imposed requiring workers who have voted lawfully for strike action to cross their own picket lines or face dismissal. Non-compliant unions are threatened with fines of up to £1 million.

The Sunak government has already outlined widespread strike-breaking plans, requiring train operating companies and light rail companies to operate 40 percent of services during industrial action. The Department for Education has proposed that the minimum level of service in education would keep 74 percent of pupils in school during industrial action.

A hurricane of bluster at the special congress could not conceal the hollow character of the speechifying about "solidarity" and "resistance".

TUC General Secretary Paul Nowak stated, "This movement is not in the business of telling anyone to cross a picket line." But the actual "ongoing campaign" against MSLs excludes any collective action by workers, with non-compliance left to individual workers or, theoretically only, affiliated unions.

The TUC's statement commits to nothing more than the

calling of a demonstration "in the event a work notice is deployed and a union or worker is sanctioned in relation to a work notice."

Nowak confirmed therefore that "deploying novel and effective forms of industrial action" means no strike action at all.

Kate Bell, TUC assistant general secretary, was quoted in the *Financial Times* stating that the purpose of Saturday's meeting was to discuss "every lever at our disposal" to oppose the laws "designed to escalate disputes, not resolve them."

This sums up the "non-compliance" campaign of the TUC, which is defined not by a mobilisation of the working class but by preventing one. Its chief advocates are those falsely built up in the media and by the pseudo-left organisations as a new layer of militant union leaders.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch issued a press release the day before the special congress stating that the meeting "will signal the start of the industrial struggle against Minimum Service Levels." But in his speech to the meeting, he proposed no such thing.

Lynch stressed, "Importantly, the government has left the issue of work notices to the discretion of employers..." This alluded to what the Stalinist *Morning Star* reported as the TUC's "campaigning to force commitments from employers never to issue a work notice," which had supposedly "already succeeded in securing these guarantees from the Scottish and Welsh governments" and "must be stepped up, to encompass every level of devolved power, every essential service and private business..."

Lynch postured as a critical supporter of this bankrupt strategy, noting that the RMT would write to employers calling on them not to use work notices and affirming that "It is vital that unions come together to pressure the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and the regional mayors to make a pledge never to issue a work

notice if there is a breakdown in industrial relations.

“Isolating Westminster politically will show that the Tory Government alone wants minimum service legislation implemented.”

Some solidarity! Key workers immediately being targeted, including ASLEF train drivers in their ongoing dispute on national rail, are to fend for themselves. The RMT will instead rely upon the supposed good graces of the employers and various regional administrations controlled by Labour or the Scottish National Party.

The role played by the trade union bureaucracy has not been to oppose anti-strike laws but to sell out strikes.

The legislation was proposed by the Tories as their answer to a mass strike wave encompassing over two million workers in the National Health Service, education, the civil service, Royal Mail and on the rail. Almost all these strikes have been sold out prior to the imposition of the new legislation.

The last year-and-a-half proved that bureaucratic control and sabotage is a greater threat to working-class struggles than any Tory legislation. In fact, the Tories rely totally on the bureaucracy to impose their legal attack.

Lynch referred to the role of the RMT in the “mass strike wave”, which he claimed continues in various sectors and regional disputes. But the RMT national rail strike which kick-started the summer strike wave last June has been finally ended after 18 months.

Following the earlier rotten deal at Network Rail in March, the RMT drew up a Memorandum of Understanding with the 14 train operating companies, pushing sell-out terms onto 20,000 rail workers involving a drastically below-inflation pay deal for the first year and an award for the following year tied to surrendering terms and conditions negotiated on a company-by-company basis.

The RMT is also sitting on a fifth strike mandate returned on November 7 by its 3,000 members on the London Underground in the dispute dating back to January 2022 against cuts to the network by Labour Mayor Sadiq Khan.

Lynch’s fellow blowhard, Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham, acknowledged the token character of voting for the TUC statement, asking, “What does a real strategy for non-compliance look like, what are we prepared to do?” But she failed to answer her own question, speaking only of taking a “decision to act.”

Graham’s concern, as leader of the second largest union in the UK with over a million members, is that the Tory legislation makes her job of policing and betraying strikes

more difficult. She warned in the *Guardian*, “Making trade unions police their own strikes and force members to work in disputes will do no more than prolong those disputes and compel people to take alternative action.”

The only other immediate step the TUC was prepared to sanction was a call for a national demonstration and rally on January 27 in Cheltenham to mark 40 years since the ban on trade unions at the GCHQ spy centre imposed by the Thatcher government. The overturning of the ban by the Blair Labour government in 1997 is presented as a victory against the attack on workers’ rights, covering over the fact that the Labour government maintained the full raft of anti-strike legislation from its Tory predecessors.

This experience speaks against the claims by the TUC that an incoming Labour government under Sir Keir Starmer will repeal the Strikes Act within the first 100 days of taking office. During the strike wave, Starmer declared himself an opponent of industrial action and instructed his shadow cabinet ministers not to attend picket lines.

Nothing is said by the TUC about the continued rightward lurch of Labour under Starmer, who has declared his admiration for Thatcher, or its support for austerity, low taxation for the rich and increased military spending to wage war in Ukraine and back Israel’s genocidal siege on Gaza. To do so would expose the fraud of expecting a Labour government to do today what Tony Blair and Gordon Brown refused to do in 1997.

A fight against the Strikes Act requires the mobilisation of the working class, organised independently from a union apparatus that will not lift a finger to prevent the outlawing of workers’ struggles. The formation of rank-and-file committees to develop a unified response is bound up with the adoption of an international and socialist perspective against the consensus for austerity and war shared by the Tories, Labour and their industrial allies in the TUC.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**