

Strike wave building in Northern Ireland as Stormont crisis drags on

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Workers in Northern Ireland brought the entire public transport network in the six counties to a halt on four separate days in the run up to Christmas—December 1, 15, 16 and 22.

The strikes, impacting all bus and train services, as well as the rapid transit Glider service in Belfast, are in pursuit of a pay increase. More strikes are expected in the New Year.

Translink's 4,000 workers are currently facing a pay freeze, effectively an 11.4 percent cut, because of a freeze in UK government funding to all Northern Ireland departments, including the Department of Infrastructure, responsible for public transport. The strikes, once again showing the social power of the working class, followed huge majorities among the company's Unite, GMB and SIPTU trade union members. All three unions recorded majorities of well over 90 percent on turnouts above 60 percent.

The transport strike followed a 48-hour walkout by 800 school support staff, including bus drivers, classroom assistants, cooks and clerical staff, on November 15 and a 12-hour teachers' strike November 29.

The teachers' strike saw educators from all five education unions, the UTU, NASUWT, INTO, NAHT and NEU, strike simultaneously. The NAHT (National Association of Head Teachers) had never previously taken strike action in its 126 years of existence. Further strikes are planned for the spring term, although no dates have been set. Teachers have been involved in "action short of a strike" for over a year following three years of effectively frozen pay under conditions in which inflation has climbed above 10 percent.

December also saw five days of strike action by 50 members of public sector union NIPSA at two warehouses run by the Business Services Organisation (BSO) of the Health and Social Care Service, part of the UK National Health Service. The BSO, which distributes

essential health supplies to hospitals and to the community, is staffed by low-paid workers, many on £10.92 an hour.

NIPSA Deputy General Secretary Patrick Mulholland told the BBC's *Nolan Show*, "It is clear that health service workers are being used as hostages in this situation; they have been refused a pay rise as a pressure point in the political talks over getting Stormont back up and running." He noted that workers in Scotland doing the same job were getting as much as £3,000 more annually for the same job, adding, "There is a pay border around Northern Ireland at the minute, it has become the low pay centre for these islands".

Mulholland's comments point to the crucial role the trade union apparatus has played by suppressing the class struggle, giving the British government and the Northern Ireland parties time to attempt to resolve on their own terms the intractable wrangles around the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Executive in Stormont and the so-called Irish Sea border.

Both the Assembly and Executive have been suspended since February 2022 when then First Minister Paul Givan of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) resigned in protest against the Northern Ireland Protocol—the component of the UK's departure from the European Union which introduced documentation checks at Irish Sea ports between Britain and the six counties. The trade restrictions are perceived by pro-British unionists as undermining Northern Ireland's position in the UK.

Sinn Féin, the leading Irish republican party, won a subsequent election to become the largest party in the North. This changed nothing since the hard right DUP, by far the largest unionist party and hence holding the right to nominate the Deputy First Minister, refused to do so and prevented the Assembly and Executive being revived. Further elections due under the terms of the "New Decade, New Approach" deal of 2020 have not been held.

The British government has been seeking a resolution which would revive Stormont, with Sinn Fein providing the first minister, while appeasing unionist forces over the terms of the protocol. An agreement, the Windsor Framework, cobbled together to rebuild relations with the European Union, under pressure from the Biden administration in the US, was reached in early 2023 and passed in Westminster. The deal set out different customs arrangements for goods, dependent on their final destination, but the DUP, pressured by hardline loyalists within and outside its ranks, has not agreed to it.

Subsequent talks, concluded in December, between Northern Ireland Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris and the DUP, appear to have resolved nothing. The DUP was widely reported to be on the brink of accepting the basic outlines of the Windsor Framework in return for more cash from the British government. At the last minute, however, the party leadership around Sir Jeffrey Donaldson backed off, undoubtedly influenced by posters denouncing a “DUP Sellout” which appeared in loyalist areas.

Loyalist commentator Jamie Bryson was given column space in the *Belfast Newsletter* to complain that “the Windsor Framework has infected our fundamental constitutional arrangements.” At the time of writing no further talks are planned.

Over the entire period of suspension, the Northern Ireland Secretary has effectively been in control of all public spending in the six counties. Heaton-Harris, in line with efforts by Sunak government in Westminster to pressure the DUP into line, has refused any increase in the annual subvention handed to Northern Ireland, frozen at £14.2 billion. As a consequence, every area of public spending and public sector pay has been brutally squeezed by inflation, which remains as high as 6.7 percent.

While the British government is reported to have come up with more cash, £3.3 billion, for a revived Assembly and Executive to dispense, this will only become available if the “institutions” are up and running.

Moreover, should agreement finally be reached, Heaton-Harris intends to task the Sinn Fein and DUP-run administration with far-reaching “reforms” intended to “improve the sustainability of public finances”. In other words, cuts and charges. In September Heaton-Harris wrote to all the Northern Ireland government departments demanding consultations on introducing water and waste charges, prescription charges, charges for social care and increases in university student tuition fees.

This is the context for the Irish Congress of Trade

Unions, Northern Ireland Committee (ICTI-NIC) calling a “generalised day of action” for January 18.

Announcing the event, ICTU-NIC General Secretary Gerry Murphy made clear he wants nothing more than Stormont to be revived: “The Secretary of State has accepted that public sector pay needs to be settled and has admitted that he has the money to settle it.” Murphy went on to endorse Heaton-Harris’ agenda by calling for the “restoration of the NI Executive so that we can begin to bring some stability to public services here.”

The ICTU aims to continue subordinating the working class to Stormont based on a minimal UK cash handout intended primarily to open up new attacks on working people. This is how the unions seek to stabilise Northern Ireland as an investment platform.

Murphy hinted at limits being reached, as the crisis drags on, in the trade unions’ capacities to control the working class. “Over the past year, almost every union has taken Action Short of Strike (sic) action, and intermittent strike action, on the back of unprecedented support from members.” As many as 12 unions, including those representing radiographers, nurses, midwives, teachers, headteachers, physiotherapists, civil servants and dieticians, have indicated their intention to take some form of action on the 18th.

The entry of broad sections of the working class in the six counties into struggle will pit workers and young people against the trade union bureaucracy seeking to restrain them, as it has in Britain. The fight against the trade union apparatus in pursuit of workers’ own social interests, which must be taken up by independent rank-and-file organisations, is inseparable from a political struggle against Stormont, all its parties, partition, and the entire rotting framework of capitalist rule in Ireland, the UK and Europe. Only the Trotskyist programme advanced in Ireland by the Socialist Equality Group provides an axis for this offensive.



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