

Strike wave continues to build across Britain

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Around half a million workers took strike action across Britain on 1 February in the biggest wave of strikes for over a decade.

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This not only involved people withdrawing their labour and mounting picket lines at their own place of work, but often participating in vibrant demonstrations and rallies in city centres. The action had two targets – on the one hand to further disputes about pay and working conditions with their own employers, and on the other hand opposition to the even harsher anti-trade union laws the Tory UK government is rushing through the Westminster parliament.

Six unions took action on 1 February. The civil service union, PCS, was the first to call out over 100,000 members across 124 UK and devolved government departments. Workers in many of the employing departments had previously met the ridiculously high turnout threshold in a postal ballot for strike action under the existing reactionary anti-union laws. PCS members in those departments have been involved in rolling action since late December. The union is reballoting members in other departments where workers had voted for action but missed the turnout threshold by a small amount.

The University and College Union (teachers in further and higher education), UCU, called out 70,000 members in the university sector on this day as part of 18 days of action to take place across the next two months, following the failure of the latest discussions with the 150 employers to come up with an offer that would in any way restore the decimation of pay over the last 12 years of Tory rule. The increasing casualization of the sector is also driving militancy. (UCU members in further education in England and Wales were not called out on strike on 1 February 1 though they are in dispute over pay. In at least one college, and probably more, they took brief solidarity action. Scottish College teachers in the EIS union have fought bitter but successful strike battles in recent years and gave logistical support to their members in Schools and Universities involved in the current disputes). In some universities, UCU members are also in dispute over the decimation of their pension scheme.

The train drivers union ASLEF brought out the majority of its 21,000 members on 1 February employed in over a dozen train companies. ASLEF will hold further action after failing to reach agreement with the employers on pay and conditions – this will be its seventh day of strike action. The transport union RMT also brought out their driver members on 1 Feb and the other day ASLEF are striking. This seems like a lost opportunity from the RMT who in many ways has been the backbone of the strike movement since last summer as the majority of their members are not drivers, but carry out other roles. The RMT are balloting members on a new offer but rejection is

expected.

For these transport unions – and their passengers – what is at stake in these disputes, which for the RMT has involved strike action over nine months, also includes major jobs losses. The proposals that many trains will be driver only has huge safety implications and will also make trains even less accessible for disabled people many of whom are dependent on assistance to access and leave the services.

The other union that took major strike action in England and Wales on 1 February is the NEU, the main school teachers' union in those countries, demanding a fair and fully funded pay increase. The NEU announced the result of their ballot on 16 January. They succeeded in getting strong enough results to bring all their members out in Wales but in England only teaching members struck as not a high enough proportion of school support staff returned their ballots. The second largest teachers' union in England and Wales, the NASUWT, had voted overwhelmingly for strike action but failed to meet the turnout threshold. Some NASUWT members have joined the NEU in order to strike and over 40,000 new members joined the NEU union since they announced their ballot results and programme of strike action.

Schooling in Scotland is separate from that in England and Wales and the school teachers' union there, EIS, is involved in a different pattern of industrial action with one day national strikes in January followed by a rolling programme of one day action during January and February covering two council areas at a time. This will be followed by two days of all out strikes across the whole of Scotland on 28 February-1 March. This dispute is with local government employers and the Scottish government of the Scottish National Party (SNP) – supported by Greens. The EIS is the major union in Scottish schools, particularly primary, but three smaller teacher unions have also voted for strike action. Picket lines at schools and attendance at local rallies have grown significantly during the action and the predominantly female membership of EIS is becoming increasingly combative – a complete two day shutdown of Scotland's schools is very likely.

Despite the fact that the mainstream media, very often hand in hand with the UK government, have attacked the strikers over months and desperately tried to find supposedly 'ordinary members of the public' who will rail against them, the strikes remain hugely popular.

Popular support for strikes

There are many reports of both parents and pupils joining picket lines outside schools in support of those who work there. University students in support of UCU's strike action also joined pickets and demonstrations at campuses across Britain and student strike solidarity groups are beginning to become a feature of campus life and also starting to raise the issue of the impact of the cost-of-living on a million students, which is largely invisible presently.

Marches on 1 February were greeted with bus and car horns tooting in support and people coming out of workplaces and houses and cheering and clapping. Increasing numbers of working class people recognise that the cost of living crisis is an attack on all of us, in work and out of work, and across generations.

The reports of turn out on the demonstrations, was impressive. 40,000 in London, 9,000 in Oxford, 7,000 in Bristol, 1,000 in Cardiff, 500 in Swansea, 2000 in Leeds, 4,000 in Manchester, 1,000 in Glasgow, 700 in Nottingham at the indoor rally and many more marching, 2000 in Leeds, 4,000 in Manchester and smaller numbers in other places. For many other protests, reports just say thousands marched.

What was as important as turnout was the mood – certainty that the pay claims put forward by the unions are completely justified and that the services that the workers provide as well as their wages have been devastated by more than a decade of austerity. People are clear that the ‘minimum service bill’ – the formal name of the anti-trade union bill – is a very sick joke in a country where understaffing and overwork means services are failing apart, especially in the NHS and existing laws are so draconian. UK unions face very restrictive laws hampering strikes – they must hold postal ballots not electronic ones, high proportions have to vote, disputes can only be against individual employers not the controlling body like governments, and 14 days notice has to be given of strikes. Defiance would lead to courts seizing union funds and prosecuting officers and members.

The mainstream media in Britain are making a great deal of the fact that more than twice as many workers took strike action against attacks on public sector pensions in 2011. But the situations aren’t comparable. Most workers knew at the time that the action in 2011 was no more than a token protest. 1 February is part of a wave of action over seven long months for some unions – and one that may well not have crested.

In Scotland and Wales, the devolved governments of the SNP (with Green support) and Labour (with Plaid Cymru support) have tried to make better pay offers than the Tory UK government, so some strikes have been avoided in one or both of those countries. Formally all four of these predominantly social democratic influenced parties are sympathetic to union demands and the right to strike. However they do not have the legal or fiscal powers of the UK government and the social democratic parties are trapped within the constraints of UK devolution. Unless they can break free from that constraint, they will ultimately be part of the problem rather than the solution.

Action to come

While six unions struck on 1 February that doesn’t include all those currently engaged in industrial action. No health unions were on strike that day but the four main ones will be taking action in England between 6-10 February. The nurses’ union, the Royal College of Nursing, RCN will strike on 6-7 February. For most of its 100 year history the RCN had a ban on strikes, so the current action marks a significant change. Ambulance workers from the GMB and Unite unions will also strike in England on 6 February, while the third union, Unison, is calling out its ambulance workers out on 10 February in England. The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy is striking on 9 February. So there is only one day that week when no health workers will be taking action. Junior doctors in England in the BMA union are also balloting on strike action over pay and the strikes could follow in March. In Wales, the GMB have suspended their action in order to put a new offer from the Welsh government to their members.

Two other groups should be mentioned. Postal workers in the Communication Workers Union, CWU, took 18 days of strike action over pay and conditions in the run up to Christmas. In fact they had two separate ballots – no-one I have spoken to understands why – a few weeks apart. Under existing anti-union laws their mandate for action on pay ran out and they have had to re-ballot. The first was on pay, the second on conditions – where management are generally trying to drive up productivity, force van drivers to become self-employed and turn Royal Mail into a parcel delivery company like Amazon.

Under existing anti-union laws their mandate for action on pay ran out and they have had to re-ballot. Unfortunately the reballot results are not expected until 16 February, and 14 day notice to the employer needed of the intention to strike means that strikes on this issue cannot be resumed until early March. In the meantime they have announced a strike over conditions on 16 February, in

a situation where local management are unilaterally imposing changes.

The fire fighters' union, FBU, announced the result of their UK-wide ballot for industrial action on 30 January with a magnificent 88% voting yes on a 73% turnout. They have given the employers and the governments 10 days, until 9 February, to make an improved offer that they could put to their members. The FBU is relatively small with a membership of under 35,000 but in a very strategic position..

Meanwhile for all the unions that were out on 1 February, that day was only one of a series, in different patterns according to the union and or industry. There is some discussion about another day of co-ordinated action perhaps in early March – and those of us particularly involved in campaigning against the anti-union laws are demanding a national demonstration against the new law. At any rate, there is no doubt that morale is higher after 1 February than before. Over a million workers currently have mandates for strike action but 1 February was the first coordinated day across Britain – many are looking to a greater level of coordination in future.

Are unions in Britain up to the task ahead ?

The history, pattern and traditions of trade union organisation in every country varies. An unusual feature in Britain is that there is a single UK-wide trade union federation, the Trade Union Congress, TUC, to which almost all trade unions are affiliated ; 98 in all. There are exceptions. The RCN is not affiliated to the UK TUC – and originally was much more of a professional association than a trade union. On the other hand there are smaller unions – the Industrial Workers of the World UK, the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain and United Voices of the World, which see themselves as more democratic than traditional unions and often target the overlapping groups of workers in the gig economy and migrant workers, and are also independent of the TUC. In Scotland there has been an independent centre for trade union organisation for over a century – the STUC – but membership largely overlaps with the TUC's, there is mutual recognition and the STUC largely functions as the unitary trade union organisation in that country.

Amongst unions affiliated to the TUC there are significant differences. Some are industrial unions who organise in a single industry while others are general unions which recruit in many spheres. Many unions exist in the whole of the United Kingdom including the north of Ireland while some also recruit in the Republic of Ireland. EIS the teaching union that only organises in Scotland was mentioned earlier and there is also a small education union that only organises in Wales. Strangely the Artists Union of England only supports artists living there.

Traditionally most industrial unions were affiliated to the Labour Party whereas those that organised in white collar jobs or the public sector were less likely to be. Affiliation allows unions to input formally into the Labour Party's policy making. But it has also often allowed many union leaders to argue against strikes on the basis of 'don't rock the boat'. This caution applies not only when Labour is in government but also in the run up to a general election on the basis of presenting kicking out the Tories as being the most – sometimes the only – important thing. But given that the TUC itself takes the same approach, such arguments have an impact on unions not affiliated to Labour too.

The level of workplace organisation varies enormously. Before the historic defeat of the 1984-85 Miners' strike there was a significant growth and co-ordination of shop stewards – elected representatives in workplaces and indeed amongst sections of workers doing the same job. These activists acted as a voice of members in disputes with management but also as a conveyor belt of union messaging to the members and as a challenge to ideas of social partnership where union full-timers were attempting to spread these.

But after the defeat of the miners' and other key strikes that layer of militancy was seriously weakened by industrial and political defeat, including massive redundancies and closures across industry. Nor was it possible to recruit significant new, younger activists even in the expanding public and service sector given that the overwhelming majority of union leaderships were pushing either social partnership or a 'service' model – join a union to get cheaper insurance etc – or a combination.

The shift to the right was not universal but smaller and more militant unions like the RMT and FBU were unable to shift the overall balance of forces. The number of days lost to strike action fell to historic lows – along with the number of union members, especially in the private sector. The proportion of UK employees who were trade union members fell to 23.1% in 2021. This represents the lowest union membership rate on record among UK employees for which we have comparable data. In 1979 the TUC claimed a membership of 13 million, in 2022 just 5.5 million.

The strikes of the last seven months have begun to turn the situation around – recruiting more union members, motivating more activists and giving many the first taste of their collective power. The fact that the Tory UK government – who are often directly or indirectly responsible for pay levels – are both so intransigent and so hated impacts the dynamic. Where some employers in the private sector have settled with double digit pay settlements after no strike action or relatively short disputes, there is no sign of movement in these big public sector strikes thus far.

This means that despite the fact that Labour are miles ahead of the ruling Tories in the UK wide opinion polls, any attempt to use “don't rock the boat” rhetoric is not going to have a significant effect on combativity. A wider social movement in solidarity with the strikes is also beginning to develop, often drawing inspiration from the Miners' Support Groups that existed in the 1984-85 (and were depicted in the popular film 'Pride'). Local trade union organisations – Trades Councils – have been marginal for decades but may start to play a larger role.

In many unions, including those currently taking strike action, full time officers, rather than people elected by lay members, have the main say in how disputes are run and when strikes are declared. Left caucuses in most unions are weak and fragmented – often spending as much time arguing with each other as with either the employer or the union bureaucracy, and showing virtually no focus on how to involve new activists radicalising in the workplace.

This means there is a need for two strategic debates. On the one hand there is the need to discuss how to win the current strikes – a subject on which there is a significant amount of agreement on the radical left around slogans of escalation and co-ordination. But beyond this, and whether or not we succeed in all cases in beating back the assault on our living standards, our working conditions and our right to organise, we need to stand back and consider how to remake our trade unions so that workers ourselves decide how and when to take action not those who we employ who should be there to help implement those decisions not to stymie or blunt their effectiveness.

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- Terry Conway is a supporter of Socialist Resistance, which collaborates with the Fourth International