

Britain: Contradictions in British strike wave

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It has been a contradictory time for strikes in Britain.

Some ballots for strike action have been won. Postal workers needed to reballot after their six-month mandate ran out; 95.9% of those voting said yes to further strike action with a turnout of 77.3%. The latter is down on the first ballot but pretty impressive after months in which management ignored the strikers' demands and imposed disastrous changes in conditions.

Great news—but rather than announcing new strike dates, the union leadership is focusing on the fact that “formal negotiations” are due to take place this week. This is despite the imposed changes and the number of union representatives who have been victimised during the strikes.

Unison in health has re-balloted ambulance workers and others in a number of areas where turnout was too low last time around and won most of those. This will strengthen action, particularly by ambulance workers—but it doesn't address the problem that three different unions in the sector aren't coordinating.

It's excellent that the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) has called the most sustained action so far with a 48-hour strike in England in early March. They also said they will only negotiate “life and limb” coverage nationally, not locally. Many health workers think what has been provided thus far has been better staffing levels than when there are no strikes. Such is the crisis in the NHS caused by a lack of funding, privatisation, and the fact that many workers can earn more working in a supermarket than in the health service.

Pat Cullen, the general secretary of the RCN, seems determined to present the nurses as a special case and doesn't coordinate with other unions, particularly those outside the sector. True, public support for these strikes is extremely high—but this shows no signs of bridging the Tory government in Westminster. Meanwhile, the RCN in Scotland is balloting its members over a new offer from the government there—just under 7 percent for the majority plus a lump sum.

The biggest problem is what has happened in the lecturers' union, UCU. The dispute involving their members in higher education is not only about appalling pay but also about pensions and conditions—particularly the massive increase in casualization.

Last Monday, the union and management went into discussions with the Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service (ACAS), a mechanism that has often led to strikes being settled over the heads of workers. But two further days of strike took place during the week, and further action was planned over the next two weeks as well as preparation for a reballot.

Then on Friday night, General Secretary Jo Grady tweeted a video unilaterally stating that the next two weeks' strikes would be “paused.” “We have agreed to a two-week period of calm.” She said it “will enable us to hold intensive negotiations with the aim of reaching a final agreement.” This move is being met with anger because it was made without consulting the members or even the elected

committee that is supposed to be running the dispute. Unison who were also taking action in parts of HE followed suit

Grady herself argued in 2018, before she was General Secretary, that “continuing action during ACAS is not only the right move but a clear signal from UCU that they are not backing down. It demonstrates our strength.” Indeed.

This major retreat is an extreme example of the way too many of the current strikes have been run—from the top down and with too little involvement of the workers themselves. The next week will see a key test of the strength of the balance of forces within the union—and one that potentially has an impact on the overall trajectory of the strike wave.

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P.S.

• Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 20 Feb 2023:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/contradictions-in-british-strike-wave/>