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Britain: What kind of trade unions do we need?

Sunday 28 May 2023, by [CONWAY Terry](#) (Date first published: 23 May 2023).

This article, by Terry Conway, discusses the recent surge in industrial action in Britain, led by multiple trade unions, in response to a substantial decline in living standards, and analyses the opportunities, challenges, and obstacles faced by these movements in their fight for better pay and working conditions.

We have seen the most sustained course of industrial action in Britain for decades in response to a huge attack on living standards since last summer.

This wave has involved members from a whole range of trade unions and many thousands of individual workers, overwhelmingly in the public or formerly public sector. There has been some limited activity elsewhere, most notably among Amazon workers in Coventry.

There are many positives about what has taken place. Strike action has brought many younger workers into action for the first time—people who have been sold trade unions as a route to cheap insurance rather than a place to organise collective action. And there is nothing like a dispute with your employer to create a cauldron of education about how capitalism actually works, destroying many of the myths people are sold day by day.

Despite sharp attacks from the mainstream media and politicians, the demands of different unions for decent pay increases to prevent so many workers from having to choose between heating and eating have been met with strong support from the public. Attacks on terms and conditions central to many of the disputes are also unpopular, especially when share holders and managers continue to celebrate rising profits ripped off the backs of workers.

This is no surprise when other sections of the working class, be they workers in unionised work places, those dependent on benefits, retired people, or students, can see that those who are striking are effectively fighting for us all. Everyone knows many other friends and family members who are struggling, including in jobs or industries where, not that long ago, this would not have been what people expected.

The launch of the very popular “[Enough is Enough](#)” campaign with the potential to link struggles around wider issues like housing and the right to food with strike solidarity seemed very positive towards the end of last summer. However, the initiative was effectively strangled at birth by its primary movers, who, after organising a series of very impressive rallies and a mammoth mailing list, did nothing to allow local supporters to get in touch with each other and build on the ground.

And it's not only “Enough is Enough” where the bureaucracy has tried to keep a tight rein on what does and does not happen. The disputes themselves have generally been run in a very top-down way, with stewards and workplace representatives often treated as stage armies rather than the subject of the action.

The fact that Labour under Starmer has failed to back the strikes has also done nothing to strengthen the movement. There have been a small number of left constituency Labour Parties whose banners have appeared on the big demonstrations that have happened over these months and on some local picket lines, along with an equally small number of left MPs and doubtless many individual party members out on strike or involved in support work, but this is completely eclipsed by the fact that the Labour leader forbade members of his Shadow Cabinet from supporting workers in struggle. This, together with so many of Starmer's pronouncements, makes clear that his only concern is not to garner popular support but to clearly position himself as a safe pair of hands for capital.

And none of this is helped by longer-term factors such as the fact that trade union organisation in Britain has not recovered from the massive defeats of the 1984-5 miners' strike and the wave of deindustrialisation that followed, leaving trade unions and their workplace organisation of shop stewards networks demoralised and hollowed out.

The fact that Britain has the most developed and reactionary trade union laws in Europe—even before the Minimum Service Bill comes in—also completely shackles the trade unions. The depth of the economic and social crisis in Britain was enough to win ballots for action for many unions last summer. Given all these factors, we are reaching a stage where some actions are stalling and others are in danger of leading to defeat.

Several unions have had to re-ballot as reactionary laws mean that mandates only last for six months. Even where these have been won, e.g., by rail unions, the lack of any apparent strategy to win from the leadership means that demoralisation could set in. In the civil service union PCS, one of the biggest and historically militant departments, the [Department for Work and Pensions just missed the threshold for further action](#).

Health worker action is fragmenting. It's certainly true that the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) has been transformed from an organisation that never took industrial action to one in which members rejected the government's offer of a 5 percent pay rise—way below existing inflation—against the advice of their leaders. In the run-up to the RCN conference, General Secretary Pat Cullen said that only a double-digit offer can stem a campaign of strikes through Christmas, but the RCN needs to win another ballot before it can strike again.

Meanwhile, two other large unions, UNISON and GMB, which organise health workers across a number of different grades, have accepted the government's offer, while Unite members have rejected it. There has also been action by junior doctors, whose previous dispute in 2015/16 was sold out by its then leadership and has been replaced by a more determined team.

In this context, the development of the "[Health Workers Say No](#)" campaign, bringing activists together across unions, is a small but significant step forward, but there needs to be a much wider discussion about arguing for industrial trade unionism as well as for grass-roots control of disputes.

For the struggles in the NHS as well as those in education, the question of funding for pay increases, as well as for the services more generally, is key. In this context, there is a weakness in the fact that most union leaderships, with the exception of the [National Education Union](#), are not taking up this question centrally.

The worst situation among workers who have taken sustained action is that faced by postal workers. These workers struck for 18 days in 2022, but now the supposedly left wing union leadership is recommending acceptance of a deal that is a complete disaster. It will significantly increase the amount of outdoor work, cut sick pay, and force people with caring responsibilities off the job—all

for a 10 percent pay rise over 3 years.

And at least 400 union activists have been suspended or dismissed by management during the dispute, and the union just claims that this will be 'reviewed' when members sign up for the deal. Historically, postal workers had a proud tradition of unofficial action—walking out or at least making a believable threat of doing so—to prevent worsening of terms and conditions and management bullying at the local level. But the last decade of privatisation – and the failure of the union to effectively fight this—has seen a serious undermining of the workplace strength on which such militancy depended.

But the CWU leadership has adopted a problematic approach all the way through the dispute, where much of their main focus in media interviews was about how badly 'the business' was being run by then Chief Executive Simon Thompson. There can be no doubt that Thompson was a hated bully boy and that workers celebrated when he was forced to stand down. But there is no indication that with Thompson gone, the other negotiators changed tack at all. The victimisations and the revisions of duties—often involving unachievable delivery targets—imposed in December remain.

And if this rotten deal goes through, management will quickly come back for more. That's why the launch of a Postal Workers Say Vote No group is a very welcome step—but one with a hard job to do because it is also clear that to defeat these changes there would need to be a serious escalation of action—something rather unlikely to happen when not a single current member of the postal workers executive voted against recommending acceptance of the deal. The longer-term task, as a [recent interview on the A*CR website](#).

These are just some of the landscapes in unions where action has been taking place. It's beyond the scope of this article to assess each of them in detail. Elizabeth Lawrence previewed the UCU conference, scheduled to take place in Glasgow from Saturday 27 May to Monday 29 May, [here](#), pointing out among other things the dissatisfaction of many activists with the way the General Secretary has conducted the dispute as well as the way many of the employers in Higher Education are trying to force workers, whose conditions have been fundamentally undermined over the last decade and more, to cave in by implementing salary deductions of up to 100 percent for the marking and assessment boycott the union is now carrying out,

The issues explored here are part of the context in which two conferences are planned later in the summer—one in [London](#) and one in [Manchester](#)—to discuss rank-and-file organising strategy. These are welcome initiatives, and it is important that both are strongly supported and that if ongoing structures result, there is cooperation between them.

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P.S.

• Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 23 May 2023:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/what-kind-of-trade-unions-do-we-need/>