

The fight goes on in Britain

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Terry Conway reports on the latest developments in the ongoing strike wave in the United Kingdom, as workers fight for higher pay while the Conservatives prepare new anti-union legislation.

The battle of working class organisations in Britain against the reactionary Tory government has a new focus this week. The Trade Union Congress (TUC), to which the overwhelming majority of trade unions in the country belong, has called a national day of action on February 1. The focus of the day is not about wages, but against the government's plans to introduce even more draconian anti-union laws than already exist.

The impact of existing laws was demonstrated in the results of a ballot for strike action over pay this week. One of the teaching unions, the NAS/UWT, published results which saw 9 out of 10 voting members backing strike action – but they can't call members out because only 45 per cent voted. While that's a higher percentage than often vote in parliamentary elections, under existing law it's still not enough to call a strike.

Now the Tories are proposing to go further and have introduced a new law that will allow them to impose 'minimum service levels' in a whole range of sectors in a way that would fundamentally undermine the right to strike for millions of workers. The not very radical deputy leader of the Labour Party has dubbed it 'the right to sack nurses bill.'

So it's important that the TUC has declared a day of action on February 1 – but disappointing that thus far only one national union has said that it will call strike action on that day. The civil service union, PCS, has called out over 100,000 members across 124 government departments. There is still time for others to join them – industrial action not the sort of legal action and lobbying the TUC seems to be thinking about is going to be necessary – and at a sustained level – to turn the situation round.

But there are reasons to be worried about strategy and political direction not only at the level of the TUC but of individual unions. One example comes from the postal worker side of the CWU – the Communication Workers Union a union with a relatively left leadership and a history of unofficial action. They came out on strike for 18 days in the last six months in the run up to Christmas in defence of wages and working conditions. They have to reballot under existing laws to be able to continue their action – but have timed this so that they will not be able to strike again before the end of February.

A more dangerous example comes from one of Britain's biggest unions, Unison. There had been huge pressure on the government, including from some of their own back benchers, over the fact that during the increasing wave of strikes they were either refusing to meet the unions at all – or where they did refusing to allow the current round of pay negotiations to even be part of the agenda.

On Monday 9 January a meetings finally took place with health unions and ministers, and separately with transport and education workers. Rumours were circulating that perhaps the government

would offer a lump sum for health workers. They didn't – rather suggesting the only way further money could be found was by workers working harder. Given the crisis in health is made much worse by a huge staff turnover – itself driven not only by low pay but by unsustainable workload – then not surprisingly that most unions saw this as an insult.

Unfortunately this wasn't the response of Unison's negotiator who was much more positive, saying that the government's tone had changed. Tone doesn't pay bills any more than claps (applause) did during the pandemic. But the fact that, although the left won control of Unison's national executive in June 2021, the General Secretary and senior staff are on the right made this no surprise to the left in Britain.

As the crisis continues and deepens, the need to build democratic left organising at a workplace level has rarely been more critical.

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P.S.

• Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 16 Jan 2023:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/the-fight-goes-on/>