

Solidarity with the rail strikes

WORKERS POWER / 30 July 2022 / workerspower.uk

RAILWAY WORKERS are on strike against plans to cut pay, jobs and working conditions. The government is refusing to negotiate because they know a victory for rail unions will encourage millions of others to fight for a justified pay rise. We need to organise now to smash the Tory pay cap.

The government is hiding behind Network Rail and the private operating companies. Transport Secretary Grant Shapps has denied all responsibility, despite his department setting the annual budget for train operating companies. Network Rail boss Andrew Haines (annual salary: £589,999) has opposed “government intervention”, claiming it would encourage unions to “politicise disputes”.

But this *is* a political dispute. The strike represents the first serious test of the government’s public sector pay restraint policy. The Tories know a victory for rail unions will set a precedent across the public sector. The precedent the Tories — and behind them the employers — want to set is that strikes won’t win real pay increases.

The *Sun* was right to splash ‘class war’ across its front page. The employers want to keep pay low to maintain profits. The rail workers are one of the best organised sections of our movement. If rail workers can be forced to take a pay cut, the employers will use it as license to impose the same — or worse — on everyone else. That’s why this dispute has decisive importance for the whole working class. **That is why the rail workers must win.**

Defend pay, jobs and conditions

The latest figures show RPI inflation of 11.7y% and projected to reach 14% by the Autumn. Workers need to pay their bills and buy food at today’s prices—not yesterday’s.

That’s why we need to fight for inflation-proof pay claims: **current inflation plus 1% for every 1% rise**

in inflation.

The employers want to cut thousands of jobs. Even without compulsory redundancies, job losses mean more dangerous railways for workers and passengers, fewer skilled jobs and fewer apprenticeships for young people. The same goes for every other industry.

There is no need to accept the loss of skilled and experienced roles. Any worker whose post is made redundant should be offered redeployment and retraining at the equivalent grade or better. **Share out the work with no loss of pay.**

Public ownership

The argument that the pandemic has dramatically reduced commuter railway use is overstated. But in any case, tackling climate change, reducing pollution, and improving infrastructure for work and leisure requires a dramatic expansion of railways and public transport, not a reduction.

The Tories want to blame unions for the railways’ problems. But the government and bosses aren’t interested in modernisation if it hurts their profits. The railway is not run as a public service — it is run in the interest of private profit. The fight to defend jobs and conditions must go hand in hand with the fight to kick out the profiteers, and **return the railway to public ownership, run under the control of workers and passengers,** and funded by taxing the rich.

Solidarity

Rail, BT, and Openreach workers have shown the way forward. But to smash

the Tory pay cap we need to coordinate our action. In every town and borough, action committees should be formed by delegates from trade unions, workplaces, and neighbourhoods. These can start by promoting the aims of the strike to their members and co-workers, raising money for the strike fund, and organising delegations to picket lines.

As well as supporting the strike, action committees can form the basis for organising rank and file union members across the movement to maximise recruitment, turnout, and votes for action in their own ballots.

Everyone recognises the need for a united, co-ordinated resistance. The TUC should be bringing the unions together, co-ordinating ballots and campaigns. But we can’t wait for them. We need to be prepared to act with the leaders when they fight—and without them if they won’t. That means organising **a rank and file movement across the unions** to agitate for common claims and joint action.

We all know what is at stake. That’s why the refusal of the Labour Party leadership to unequivocally back the strike is so shameful. They should not be allowed off the hook. We need to use every appearance in the media to demand Keir Starmer and the shadow cabinet back the strikes. Let’s unite to fight for:

- Inflation-proof pay: 1% for 1%!
- No job losses: share out the work with no loss of pay!
- £15 an hour or 15% for all!
- National rail, mail, and utilities without compensation to the profiteers!
- Form delegate-based committees of action to organise solidarity and spread the strikes! ■

Agree with us? Get in touch to join or work together: info@workerspower.uk

Reject royal blackmail

ON 19 JULY, the CWU reported a thumping 97% vote by Royal Mail workers to strike against an insulting 2% pay rise. A second ballot is on the way over sweeping attacks to terms and conditions by management.

The next day chairman Keith Williams claimed the company is losing £1 million a day—and threatened to break up the company if workers don't accept those changes.

He is offering to open the books for CWU officials to examine. As the saying goes, there are lies, damned lies and statistics, easily manipulated by accountants. It's true that the volume of parcels and letters drops in summer—but not that much!

The truth is Royal Mail has dragged its feet hiring staff to fill vacancies, so it has to fork out for agency workers. That's why costs have risen while parcel numbers have declined. Once mail volumes start rising again that will reverse, up to the usual Christmas bonanza.

In fact Royal Mail pulled the exact same trick in summer 2020—just before two years of record profits! Royal Mail has made a respectable profit every year for the past two decades.

Postal workers worked through the pandemic to deliver mail and were applauded as key workers. Now they are being thrown under the bus. **They should reject this blackmail, vote yes in the second ballot, and insist that strike action is brought forward to show they are serious.**

Postal workers should have the backing of the entire trade union movement and the public, raising alarm at the threat to the daily delivery guarantee and making the case for the **renationalisation of Royal Mail without a penny in compensation** to bloodsucking billionaire shareholders. ■

Defend the right to strike

IN THE dying days of the Johnson government, a new law has been passed allowing bosses to break strikes by employing temporary agency staff. Business secretary Kwasi Kwarteng boasted, "This was a criminal offence. Now it's an option for business." Tory policy summed up in a tweet!

The new attack represents a serious tightening of what Tony Blair enthusiastically described as "the most restrictive anti-union laws in Europe." As if this wasn't enough, Tory leadership candidate Liz Truss has promised a further crackdown if she wins. Her proposals would institute minimum service levels on "critical national infrastructure"—effectively removing the right to strike for millions of workers in transport, energy, education, health and the post.

RMT general secretary Mick Lynch described the changes as "the latest step in a clampdown on democratic dissent, which every trades unionist and democrat must oppose".

Too right—but how? 12 trade unions have filed a legal challenge to the new law. We should use every means to overturn the changes—but we don't have to wait for the bosses' courts to decide.

We have to make the law unworkable through mass, militant and decisive action the minute it is resorted to. This means mounting mass pickets outside workplaces. Elected strike committees should organise stewarding of pickets to defend them from police harassment.

Skilled workers like engineers, train drivers or teachers are unlikely to be affected immediately. But cleaners, security guards, retail and hospitality workers are under threat. We need to be prepared to take solidarity action to help any section of workers targeted by this new law. Almost all effective trade union action—solidarity strikes, mass pickets, workplace voting—is outlawed. But enough is enough. If we all act together, they can't arrest us all! ■

Build solidarity committees

IT'S THE END of July and the heat wave of strikes shows no sign of abating. As well as BT, Aslef and the RMT we have declared ballots for strike action in Royal Mail, in 39 Further Education Colleges, Post Offices, Arriva Northwest, London tube workers... even the barristers have judged their pay offer to be criminally low!

In September others are likely to join the queue: civil servants facing job losses and pay cuts; NHS workers clapped in the pandemic, now having their pay clipped; council workers and teachers, likewise; and London buses facing huge cuts.

By striking together we can dominate the news. Other workers, not in the frontline today, will demand their union ballots and joins the strikers tomorrow.

We need to take advantage of the fact that strikes for more pay are hugely popular. When wages are turning to dust while profits and City bonuses are turning in double digit growth, people instinctively know the unions are right. Now is the time to pile in with wage demands and recruit non-union workers into the movement.

Escalation

But coordination logically poses the question of escalation. If we want to make the strikes bigger so they can become a rallying point for every other group of workers, then we also need to make them decisive.

Some RMT members have rightly criticised the decision to follow up the three days of action in June (the first of which was coordinated

with the tube strike) with a single isolated strike day at the end of July.

The bosses and the Tories know how to escalate their response to us. Royal Mail threw down the gauntlet by unilaterally tearing up posties' terms and conditions, forcing the CWU to organise a fresh ballot. Liz Truss has escalated by calling for more anti-union laws.

It is a law of the class struggle that when the enemy ups the stakes, we are ready to respond in kind. All unions in dispute need to coordinate their strike dates from now on and if possible their claims too.

Every union needs to call sharply escalating strike action: three days in the first week; then a whole week; then all out indefinite.

Every trade unionist needs to demand their union ballots now so they can join the fight. Those who are not in a union should join and recruit their workmates too.

We all need to form local strike support committees—councils of action—that can draw in representatives from every union branch and workplace, every school, college and university, every housing estate and neighbourhood. Their task is simple:

- To turn the strike wave into a class struggle;
- To make the bosses pay for the cost of living crisis;
- To turn these defensive struggles into a united offensive against the capitalist system that is the root cause of exploitation and poverty. ■

WHAT IS WORKERS POWER?

THIS BULLETIN is produced by trade unionists who support the revolutionary socialist organisation WORKERS POWER.

We support all workers in struggle against the bosses. We fight to turn every struggle into a conscious fight against the whole profit system. It is the system that is the problem, not just this or that boss or government.

Behind the Tories and their billionaire media backers lies the capitalist system. It is a system that puts millions on the dole, seeks to drive down wages and destroys the environment. It is a system that diverts attention from its crimes by bloody wars, and by dividing up the workers amongst themselves by promoting racism and sexism.

We want to destroy that system and replace it with one where production is guided by the needs of the many,

not the profits of the few. That means taking the wealth of society; the banks and the major firms, into the hands of the working class and drawing up a democratic plan of production under workers' control.

To get this we have to smash the capitalist state; the police, courts, army and judiciary and replace it with a new kind of state based on democratically elected and accountable workers' councils.

The working class has the power to do this. It is rediscovering its enormous power to defeat the bosses through strike action. We think that power should be used to smash capitalism and build a new kind of society without poverty, oppression and war.

If you agree with what we say—join us.