

workers power

WORKERS SUMMIT
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WORKERSPOWER.UK

WHAT KIND OF RANK & FILE MOVEMENT?

THE FAILURE of union leaders to mobilise the escalating and coordinated action they promised during the strike wave of 2022–23 has put rank and file activists on notice: we need better organisation, more democracy—and a new strategy. The new layer of militants drawn into the recent battles can and must be brought together and organised—in a new rank and file movement.

A year into the pay revolt, the weaknesses of the strategy decided by the leaders, left and right, are plain.

Firstly, the stop-start strikes, punctuated by months of inactivity for secret negotiations between officials and employers, have only resulted in offers of real-term pay cuts, often tied to job losses and the worsening of conditions.

Secondly, all-out strikes, supported by strike pay, have been left isolated and run as local disputes, even where they have been fighting the same company, like Stagecoach.

Thirdly, despite a great fanfare for the 15 February strike, there has been almost no real coordinated action between unions. After unprecedented rallies, the CWU leaders abandoned Enough Is Enough to focus on imposing a sellout deal. The unions and the Labour Party they fund allowed the new Minimum Service Levels Bill to pass through parliament virtually unchallenged.

Grassroots

But almost from a standing start many groups of activists responded to these setbacks. NHS Workers Say No succeeded in rejecting the RCN leadership's recommendation of a two-year pay cut. Activists in the CWU, PCS, and education unions followed their example.

The NEU strike committees have drawn in and organised hundreds of new teacher activists to demand more coordination and longer strikes. In the UCU the elected higher education committee fought a running battle against their general secretary

and got the strikes restarted.

But these green shoots are in danger of withering. RCN leaders threatened to drag out their dispute until Christmas and refused to campaign for a yes vote, sabotaging the rebalot despite a massive vote in favour of continued action. In the CWU posties accepted a sellout deal after their leaders put Royal Mail's profitability first.

In the UCU, a week of strike action called with no plan for escalation is part of a campaign by the leadership to wear down the members instead of the employees.

Unite the resistance

All this shows that relying on spontaneous and isolated resistance is dangerous. What is needed is an organisation to link these groups of activists together and unite them into a common struggle to change the leadership and strategy of our unions to meet the challenges we face.

Counterfire's How We Win in June, the Troublemakers conference in July, and the Workers Summit in September show that when a conference for union activists is called it can generate enthusiasm and widespread participation. But we need to overcome the left's addiction to launching proprietary campaigns masquerading as rank and file movements. The different initiatives need to combine their forces in a non-sectarian and democratic way to launch an independent rank and file organisation, committed to the transformation of the trade union movement.

Build a rank and file movement

● **Democratic unions:** all officials to be subject to election and recall by their members. Abolition of bureaucratic privileges, all officials to earn the average of those they represent.

● **Action that wins:** we need a return to coordinated, escalating, and all-out strikes, linked to occupations and mass picketing—with the union leaders if possible, without them if necessary.

● **Smash the anti-union laws:** General strike against any use of the anti-union laws.

● **Build workplace organisation:** unionise every worker—for the closed shop. An elected shop steward in every workplace. For control of all disputes by elected strike committees.

● **Industrial unity:** combine committees and joint union committees as a step towards industrial unions.

● **Workers' solidarity:** migrant and refugee workers welcome—and into the unions.

● **Organise the rank and file:** for a national rank and file movement.

If you agree with what you've read, help us to fight for a unified, fighting rank and file organisation.

If you would like to join us, or find out more about what we do, get in touch:

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ORGANISE THE RANK AND FILE!

TO MOUNT a real challenge to the hold of the union bureaucracy, a national rank and file movement is needed. It must openly fight the leaders and replace them with truly accountable class fighters at all levels of the unions. A national rank and file movement in Britain today should start the fight for the transformation of the unions by campaigning on the following platform:

Democratise the unions

Make the unions democratic through the annual election of all officials. Elections should be preceded by workplace and mass meetings where the relevant issues are debated in front of the members. Union leaders should be subject to recall if they betray their pledges or act against the interests of the rank and file.

National conferences, TUC and Labour Party delegations must be made up of rank and file delegates, elected directly from workplaces and branches. All officials and NECs must be bound by conference policy. Branches and combines should be autonomous, so the decision to take action is devolved to the members and seized from the hands of lawyers and officials.

End bureaucratic privileges

All officials should be paid the average wage of the workers they represent. All officials to donate their wages to strike funds during disputes and draw only strike pay and expenses necessary for the prosecution of the dispute.

The assets of the union must be put at the service of the members through fighting funds to finance strikes, support campaigns and help with organising drives.

All the unions should print monthly accounts of their financial income and outgoings. The rank and file should control expenditure and elect an audit committee to check the accounts. No perks, only necessary expenses, should be granted to officials for union business.

For direct action

We need action that can win. We need all-out indefinite strikes against every job loss announcement, linked to occupations of threatened workplaces which can hold the employers' property and equipment to ransom until the closure threats are withdrawn. These methods, not just protest action and selective strikes, should be used against each attack by the government and employers on pay, jobs, conditions and services. Return to the basic principles of trade union solidarity: not crossing picket lines, not handling scab products or delivering to scab workplaces. Defend the public sector against Labour and Tory councillors and government commissioners.

Fight the anti-union laws

The anti-union laws should be actively defied as a step towards smashing them. For the immediate recognition by the unions of all unofficial strikes. Establish rank and file apparatuses to make defiance of the laws possible: dispersal of funds amongst trusted members, organised defence of pickets and suppression of scabs, secret strike committees to prevent militants being singled out by the courts (except elected negotiators). The unions should reject their acceptance of the Thatcher-era anti-union laws: a Labour government must scrap every single piece of anti-union legislation.

Build workplace organisation

Fight to unionise every worker—agency, precarious, migrant, auxiliary, etc—and win 100% union membership in every workplace. New workers can and must be won to fighting unions on the basis of campaigns to win immediate demands by militant action. All action to be subject to or ratified by votes at democratic mass meetings. Strike committees to be elected from and accountable to mass meetings. Strike committees should have chosen representatives at all negotiations, or, where there is no strike, delegates elected by mass meetings should be involved, so as to break the monopoly

of regional and national officials on information and negotiations.

For industrial unionism

We need to create combine committees to organise all workplaces in a particular sector and joint union committees where more than one union operates in a sector or industry, with delegates elected and mandated by mass meetings. Starting with campaigning for all workers not to cross picket lines, we can begin the process of incorporating all grades into one union for each sector.

No to class collaboration

No cooperation with all workplace class collaboration schemes. Break union involvement in joint committees with bosses, other than those that enable us to negotiate from an independent position. Fight all single-union sweetheart deals and no-strike deals agreed by the bureaucrats.

Combat social oppression

Women, black and ethnic minority workers, LGBT+, the disabled and youth not only face systematic discrimination by the employers but also are under-represented in the structures of the unions and their issues sidelined. Sexist, racist and homophobic attitudes and assaults continue to pervade the unions. The unions need to fight for equality for all workers and take up their issues—for workplace crèches, against deportation raids, etc.

We demand the right to caucus for all oppressed groups of workers at every level from the workplace to the national sphere. Here oppressed workers can discuss their issues without fear from their oppressors, and bring their problems and campaigns to the attention of the wider union membership for resolution.

The workers' struggle is political

Workers don't just live for work; their lives are rooted in their communities, where the class struggle also needs to be waged. The unions must launch campaigns in the workplace and in the community for the rights of benefit claimants, migrant workers and those super-exploited as precarious workers—up to and including taking political strike action. Unions should take action in solidarity not just with trade union struggles, but with all the struggles of working people, and victims of the bosses' oppression in Britain and abroad. In particular, the unions should campaign widely against war and nationalism. Against "British jobs for British workers", all migrant and refugee workers welcome—and into the unions!

Build a rank and file movement!

A rank and file movement built on such a basis could unite militants, whether they were Labour supporters, members of left wing organisations or not politically aligned, in the fight to take back the unions from the bureaucrats.

But revolutionary communists do not see this struggle as an end in itself. Important as fighting, democratic unions are, they will face an endless guerilla war with the bosses unless they take their place in the fight to destroy capitalism altogether. For this to happen, we need not only to build a rank and file movement, but a revolutionary communist leadership of that movement, of the unions themselves, and of the whole working class.

We need a political party, with its own cells and fractions in the unions, which would take its place in the rank and file movement and stand in the front ranks of every struggle, no matter how minor, that the workers undertake.