

EDITORIAL

Organise the rank and file

THE STRIKES that have dominated the headlines for six months represent a decade of pent-up anger.

Millions of workers, especially in the public sector, have seen their real take-home pay collapse by 20–25% under the Tories; now they're asking us to take another 10–15% cut. The dam has burst.

Industrial action stands at a 30 year high, with a million strike days in December alone. January shows no sign of let up either. Rank & file activity has delivered mass pickets, rallies and demos, often impromptu. Solidarity groups supporting and linking up the strikes have sprung up across the country.

Watch your leaders

Not surprisingly union leaders are enjoying tremendous popularity, seen to be consistently winning the arguments against government ministers and right wing commentators alike.

But union members need to watch their leaders closely. Mick Lynch has praised November's deal at ScotRail, as an example of the (Scottish) government allowing real negotiation. But that deal led to a meagre 4% rise for 2023–24 and 4% next year, i.e. a 10–15% real pay cut!

Similarly, Pat Cullen has repeatedly denied the nurses claim (RPI+5%) is worth 19% and publicly agreed to halve her members' claim without any mandate whatsoever.

Now there is a real danger that the government and union leaders will try to defuse the action by negotiating a one-off non-consolidated payment on top of the Pay Review Board proposals, with the promise of further negotiation on the 2023–4 pay round.

The truth is that union leaders and members do not have the exact same interests. The trade union leaders and armies of full-time officials are a privileged caste of professional negotiators, whose salaries and contracts insulate them from the consequences of their refusal to lead a serious fight back. Their bottom line is a compromise that they can sell to their members. Our red line has to be a real pay rise.

Rank & file

That's why union members must take control of the negotiations and, indeed, every aspect of the strike. To do that they have to hold regular workplace meetings, elect recallable delegates to strike committees and link up those committees regionally, nationally and across unions. They can not only organise picket lines, solidarity anti-victimisation action, but also demand the decisive say in the running of their strike.

This will inevitably involve a confrontation with the senior officials at some stage. This can be seen by the struggle inside the UCU, where the elected lay members of the Higher Education Committee's demand for an indefinite strike has been blocked by the general secretary Jo Grady.

That's why we need not just good executive members (Broad Leftism) but a rank & file movement, with clear political goals and a strategy to achieve them—with the union leaders where possible but without and even against them when necessary.

Unite the resistance

THIS MODEL motion is being put to trade union branches and local Trades Councils by members and supporters of Workers Power with the aim of bringing together the labour movement, socialist organisations and working class communities to build a mass social movement to defend jobs, pay and living standards. Get in touch for more information: info@workerspower.uk

- We the undersigned trades unionists/branch believe that the time is ripe to launch an anti-inflation, anti-austerity movement in Britain.
- The biggest drop in incomes for 200 years will see poverty deepen and many sink into desperation. The Tories will try to cut state spending and weaken the trade union movement.
- It is in the interest of the organised section of the working class to use this lever to organise the rest of our class, to make sure we do not pay for the current crisis, as we did after the 2008 bank bailout.
- The Tories, media, right-wing populist figures and the far right will try to blame a series of scapegoats like migrants and wage culture wars for the distress of many.
- Organising workers, the retired, unemployed and the poor to fight for their immediate interests requires unity. This requires a militant defence of the rights of the oppressed – women, Black Asian and minorities, LGBTQ+ - and involving their movements, as well as resisting Tory attempts to prioritise "the economy" against environmental issues.
- From support for strikes to organising protests against local and national cuts, budget days, new bills with new attacks, there is plenty of work to be done in building such a movement.
- We need local organising meetings, broad and open, to set up local campaigns that bring together all wings of the movement, and are controlled by and accountable to the local activists and participants.
- There have been several attempts to set up anti-austerity coalitions, from People's Assembly to Enough is Enough, but none has succeeded in creating local organisation in Leeds and many other places.
- We call on People's Assembly, Enough is Enough, the trades councils and any other organisation to build such a local, democratic movement and resolve to take steps in that direction, organising for an initial meeting to explore launching a local campaign.

Workers power

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THE WORKING class is facing the most serious attack on its living standards since the introduction of austerity after the financial crisis of 2007–8.

Workers have responded with the biggest wave of strike action since the 1980s. Millions of workers in the private and public sector have struck for pay rises to keep pace with the soaring price of food, energy, rent and bills.

Hiding behind Pay Review Boards (health) or spurious claims that it is not the employer (transport), the government has obstructed negotiations and agreements for months. With no plan to deal with the crisis of British capitalism, exacerbated by years of falling productivity and the self-harm of Brexit, the Tories are resorting to an offensive against the trade unions and migrant workers, driven by the need to appease the party's populist right and membership.

It is this weakness of the government, which despite its large majority, is beholden to pro-Brexit extremists determined to complete their project of demolishing the welfare state and ripping up remaining worker and environmental protections that makes it so dangerous.

Sunak's invitation to fake negotiations on 9 January immediately followed by the announcement of the Minimum Service Bill shows it has gambled its survival on a show of strength against the unions. We have to put our organisations into fighting shape to see off the attempt to make workers pay for the crisis through the erosion of our living standards and anti-strike laws which would outlaw all effective trade unionism.

But despite the inspiring wave of strikes since last Summer, many of the unions are already in the process of trying to demobilise the action before securing any meaningful pay rises. The

other half, on the left wing of the movement, have barely got started, or only organised occasional action which can't force a victory.

The fact that the TUC Congress in October failed to agree a serious programme of coordinated action, and the feeble call for a 'day of action to defend the right to strike on 1 February' shows the official leadership is desperate to prevent the snowballing strikes accumulating a momentum of their own beyond their control.

If the unions retreat in disorder after offering only token resistance—as they did in 2011–12 during the pensions' dispute—we will suffer a terrible defeat that will surely wreck the incipient growth in union membership and militancy demonstrated by innumerable strikes and the mass attendance at Enough is Enough rallies around the country.

That's why it's vital that we get organ-

ised now to make 1 February the beginning—and not the end—of a real campaign to defeat the anti-strike laws and secure pay rises that really compensate for double digit inflation. Every union with a live mandate for action should be on strike. Activists should coordinate motions and open letters from branches and workplaces and bombard the union executives with demands for joint action. Lunchtime protests and rallies, with walkouts where possible, should be organised in every town and city. Local solidarity committees should be formed to ensure this happens.

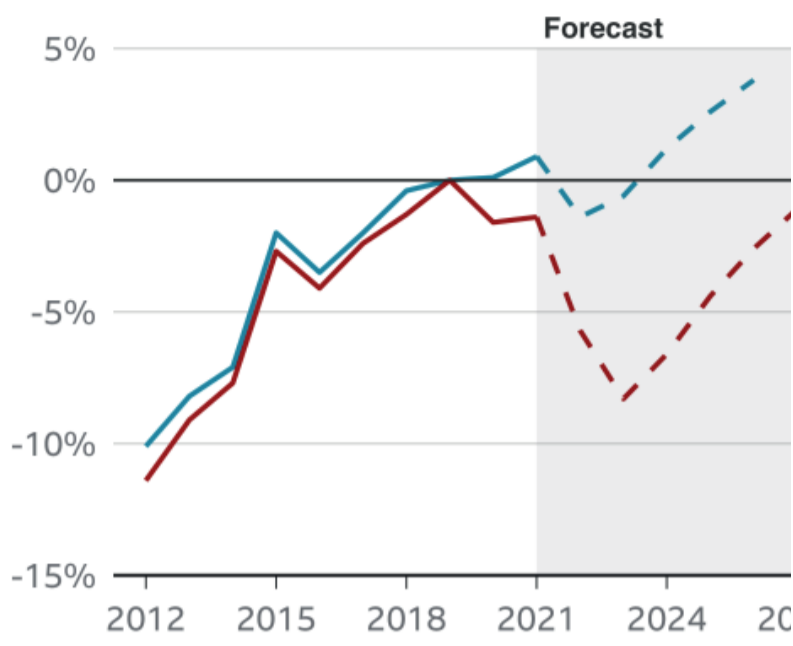
The scale of the attack demands an equivalent response. The reality is that this means being prepared for, and organised, to defy the undemocratic laws preventing us from taking effective action—mass pickets to stop scabbing, workplace meetings and votes for action, solidarity strikes up to and including a general strike.

Tasks of the hour

- Defend right to strike: all out on 1 Feb
- Joint strike committees in every workplace
- A rank and file movement in the unions
- Councils of action to unite the resistance
- Smash the pay cap: 15% for all
- Index pay, pensions, benefits to inflation
- General strike to smash the anti-union laws

Record fall in household income

Changes in real household disposable income



Source: Office for Budget Responsibility

Protect workers' incomes

INFLATION HAS reached its highest level since the 1980s. The November rate for the UK was 10.67%. Between September 2021 and September 2022, food prices increased by 14.5 percent. At the same time annual wages rises in the private sector stood at 6.7% and 2.9% in the public sector.

The purchasing power of wages has fallen dramatically—and for working class families who spend a higher proportion of their income on food and essentials which have risen faster than the headline rate of inflation, the loss has been even greater. After housing costs, the typical income for a working-age family is set to drop by 3 per cent in the year to the end of March, followed by a 4 per cent drop over the following 12 months.

While some of the reasons for rising prices are beyond the government's control, its policy of holding down pay is a deliberate choice to reduce government spending and increase private sector profits. Millions of workers are doing the same work for up to 20% less in real terms than a decade ago. Now the government and employers in the NHS, post, and rail are demanding 'reforms' in return for miserly pay rises. All this adds up to a major increase in the rate of exploitation.

What is inflation?

Simply put, inflation is a general increase in prices across the whole economy. But what causes this? Some of it results from the reduction of the available raw materials e.g. energy, and agricultural inputs. The war in Ukraine, sanctions, and the post-lockdown economic rebound caused big spikes in the price of natural gas.

Another important contribution to inflation is the increase in the money supply due to government borrowing for the pandemic schemes and quantitative easing to provide cheap credit to private companies. But underlying both factors is a deeper cause—the stagnation in profitable production, the motor of the world capitalist economy.

The central banks' only effective weapon is to raise interest rates, after a decade of near-zero interest rates, since the near collapse of the banking system in the 2007–08 financial crisis. These increases will push up mortgage payments and rents as well as the cost of borrowing for governments and companies. Turning off the cheap credit taps will force the economy into recession—the Bank of England predicts Britain will enter the longest recession since the war, with 500,000 jobs lost.

The working class of course has no control over the capitalist economy. But in the form of its trade unions and the other organisations which make up the

labour movement, it can set itself the goal of preventing or minimising the assault on its wages, its working conditions, its social services, by making the bosses pay the costs of their own system's crisis.

It is true that unions do put forward claims taking inflation into account, but the long time scales involved mean they are always playing catch-up as inflation gallops away. Worse, they fail to build in protection from future inflation. Multi-year pay deals, and negotiations based on inflation rates many months before leave workers out of pocket before the ink is dry on any agreement.

A sliding scale of wages

There are two further problems. First, unions take the official (CPI) inflation figures as the starting point but this rate has a built-in bias against workers, mainly because it leaves out housing costs at a time of spiralling rents. The Retail Price Index, which Unite has started using, does include mortgage payments but not rent rises, so also falls short, particularly for low paid workers.

Worse, workers get locked into a deal while bosses are free to hit back with further price rises. In fact, this is what the Bank of England predicts. Over the next 12 months, or longer if unions are foolish enough to sign multi-year deals, any gains will be eroded.

To combat this, workers need to demand a sliding scale of wages. This is a term in the workers' contract guaranteeing that their wages are linked to a cost of living index so that every rise in the real cost of living leads to an automatic rise in wages.

Some countries like Denmark, France, and Italy have in the past adopted what are variously called "indexation", "escalator clauses", or "automatic adjustment". Luxembourg and Belgium are the only EU countries that currently practice it. Inflation in the latter country topped 12% in October. In January 2023, nearly one million Belgians can expect a raise as high as 11.59%.

To avoid the dangers embodied in the official inflation rates the unions need to set up price watch committees, which can calculate all increases in their members' actual living costs.

As we enter the 2023–4 pay round, activists should campaign for their unions to adopt policy mandating all negotiations to include escalator clauses indexing pay to inflation.

More widely, we should campaign for the minimum wage, pensions and benefits to be linked to inflation at a rate calculated by the labour movement.

This is a first step in the fight to defend the living standards of working class people from further erosion, on the principle that we won't pay for their crisis.

General strike to kill the bill!

RISHI SUNAK'S new anti-strike Bill aims to make any effective strike on the railways, in hospitals or in schools illegal, by requiring unions to negotiate 'minimum service levels' with their employer before every strike.

The Bill has widened the group of workers affected to include firefighters, ambulance workers and border staff in response to the current strikes. The RCN called its first strike in its 100 year history in December; now its right to strike is being curtailed. At a time of galloping inflation it would empower employers to further slash wages that have fallen over the last two decades.

Right to strike

The Bill takes away a fundamental democratic right. The employer would have the right to name individual workers, who have to break their own strike.

They could, for example, name all the shop stewards and branch officials. The current spate of victimisations of union activists is a warning that the new law would be used this way.

The minimum service level is another flexible weapon for the bosses. It could be set at 50%, 90% or even 100%. If the union fails to agree with the employer's demands, government ministers can step in and set the bar.

Paramedics have pointed out that if they were to provide a service to prevent risk to life, they would have to all work and do overtime as the service is chronically underfunded! Similarly on the railways, there is a shortage of drivers and staff because of falling pay, so the Bill could make strikes purely tokenistic.

The Bill puts a legal obligation on union officials to force its members to work on strike days, to police effective scabbing. It also opens workers who refuse to obey a 'work notice' to charges of gross misconduct. If they are sacked as a result, they will not be allowed to claim unfair dismissal, as it would count as illegal strike action.

The employers could be granted injunctions to prevent strikes or sue individuals and unions for loss of revenue. Recently the maximum penalty for unlawful trade union action was raised from £25,000 to £1 million. Bankrupting our unions is clearly on the agenda.

The government says the law is necessary to provide a minimum standard of service. But across the public sector, from hospitals to libraries, services are already below the government's own

legal threshold thanks to chronic underfunding.

All out on 1 February

The new General Secretary of the TUC Paul Nowak said:

'Trade unions will fight this every step of the way. We're inviting every worker—public and private sector, and everyone who wants to protect British liberties—to be a part of our campaign to defend the right to strike.'

'On February the 1st will we hold events across the country against this spiteful new bill – which is unworkable and almost certainly illegal.'

We should demand the union leaders break off talks with the government on the Bill. Paul Nowak is talking about taking the government to court to stop the Bill. This relies on the same ruling class judges who consistently grant injunctions against the unions to suddenly become defenders of workers' rights. It cannot be our main form of defence.

The Bill will only be struck down in the courts by ruling class judges if they can see that workers will not obey it and will defy their fines.

Outlawing effective industrial action is a direct political attack by our class enemy and calls for a political counterattack using our most effective weapon: a general strike to smash all the anti-union legislation. Waiting for Keir Starmer's Labour Party would be fatal. He bans shadow cabinet members from appearing on ordinary picket lines. His shadow health secretary attacks the RCN's claim, saying Labour would not grant it.

The left-led unions like the RMT, CWU, NEU must take the lead in mobilising widespread action on 1 February. On the demonstrations and pickets, activists need to raise the demand for an all-out continuous strike to smash these laws and drive this anti-democratic government from office.

The unions today are in shackles—we need to break them by direct action. The left led unions must take the lead in launching mass protest days of action, demanding not just the killing of this Bill, but the repeal of all the Tories anti-union laws and the passing of a charter of trade union freedom.

If we build up the resistance, starting with mass meetings in the workplaces, joint-union strike committees, and mobilising assemblies uniting workers, young people and the unemployed in every community, then a general strike to 'Kill the Bill' will become a real possibility.



WORKERS POWER is a revolutionary communist organisation fighting an internationally planned socialist economy as the alternative to capitalist war, oppression and climate breakdown.

Behind the Tory government and their billionaire backers lies the global capitalist system that impoverishes millions, foments wars and destroys the environment. Regardless of whether its regimes are democratic or authoritarian, they guard the appropriation by a tiny minority of the wealth created by the working class and use it against the producers. That's why we fight to transform profit-driven production and distribution into a socially owned and democratically planned economy.

The cost of living crisis, the pandemic, climate change and war are all the morbid symptoms of a system in terminal decline. They are

prompting resistance everywhere. Workers Power participates in these struggles seeking to transform them into a conscious battle against the whole profit system.

- We won't pay for their crisis: £15 an hour minimum and a 15% rise for all. Pay, pensions and benefits to rise automatically in line with inflation as calculated by the labour movement.
- Work or full pay: We fight for a four day week with no loss of pay.
- Public services not private profit: End outsourcing and bring healthcare, transport, utilities, and mail into public ownership without a penny in compensation to the profiteers.
- Defend the environment: Expropriate the big polluters and energy generators so we can move swiftly away from fossil fuels. Reparations to countries afflicted by extreme weather con-

Rebuilding our movement

AS IMPORTANT as they are, these strikes are not the immediate answer for the whole working class. Given weak levels of unionisation and strikes in Britain since the 1980s and Thatcher, there must be a social movement against the high cost of living crisis—the poor, those on benefits, pensioners, low income workers and precarious sections of the middle classes need their incomes indexed to inflation as well.

While some left wing trade union leaders have gotten together in a campaign called Enough is Enough, they have not yet created local organisations that can harness the huge support for such a movement.

This is an urgent necessity, and they must be democratic, with mass meetings and delegates from local union and Labour branches, workplaces, housing estates and genuine campaigns of the poor, women, black and other minorities.

This could deliver powerful solidarity to the strikes and help build their rank and file and radicalism, could monitor actual prices in the local supermarkets and create a workers inflation index, while through mass protests, occupations, anti-eviction actions, force the government and local supermarkets to lower price caps and put new ones on food, confiscate profits and create mass support for nationalisation of the energy and food companies, without any compensation and under the control of the workers and the consumers themselves.

We face a Spring of mass anger and desperation. February 1 could be the beginning of a campaign of resistance that raises the prospect of finishing off this government completely. But a terrible crisis of organisation exists alongside this radicalising consciousness, and a crisis of leadership where the existing leaders of the unions (much less Labour) will do too little, too late, if at all to stop the Tory attacks.

We have to rebuild the working class movement from the bottom up in order to put it on a war footing. This means fighting for rank and file democracy in the unions, with all leaders elected, subject to recall, and democratic control over all strikes and negotiations. At the same time we need to mobilise a mass social movement to take up the fight for price controls of rent, bills and essential goods. We can do this by forming councils of action in every neighbourhood to unite unions, Labour parties and communities on a common programme of resistance.

Fighting for this alternative strategy needs organisation, and a political weapon—a mass workers' party with a socialist programme.

ditions. For a global socialist plan to prevent climate catastrophe.

- Tax the rich: 100% tax on all profits made from the crisis, for a steeply progressive tax on all income and unearned wealth.
- The pro-capitalist Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy is an obstacle to the struggle for socialism. All Labour and trade union officers to be subject to regular re-election, the right of recall, and paid the average of those they represent.
- We fight for a cross-union rank and file movement to dissolve the bureaucracy. Central to this is the fight for workers' control of production. We are for the building of fighting organisations of the working class—factory committees, industrial unions, councils of action and workers' defence organisations.
- Workers' control over all strikes and negotiations.
- Escalating action up to all-out strikes as the quickest way to stop cuts to pay, conditions and services. Mass civil disobedience to support strikes. For a general strike if the Tories or the bosses use the anti-union laws. For councils of action—with delegates from local union branches and workplaces, Labour parties, from community and youth organisations—to coordinate and lead the resistance.

Agree? Join WORKERS POWER today.