

Britain's rail strike and the struggle against war: Bring down the Johnson government!

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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Rail workers in the UK will walk out again Thursday for the second of three days of national strike action.

This is no ordinary industrial dispute. Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his government of political gangsters want to emulate Margaret Thatcher's targeting of the miners in 1984-85, which ended in a defeat that transformed the UK into a playground of the super-rich and began a social nightmare for millions of working people.

Today the Tories are intent on inflicting a yet more brutal defeat on rail workers because their strike has become the focus of a tidal wave of opposition that threatens to erupt in the coming weeks. Teachers, nurses, doctors, local government workers, Royal Mail delivery and BT workers are all seeking to launch industrial action in the next months. The conditions are emerging for a decisive confrontation with the Johnson government, but this must be given a conscious programme and leadership.

The working class must not let the Tories succeed. Every worker in the UK and internationally must rally to the rail workers' cause, forging a unified industrial and political offensive to bring down the Johnson government. This demands above all the development of organised opposition among workers and young people to the efforts of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Labour Party to isolate and betray the strike.

NATO's war and the rail strike

Yesterday's vicious attack by Conservative MP Tobias Ellwood makes clear the fundamental character of the struggle that has now begun for the entire working class. Not only is the rail strike becoming a focus for the determination of millions of workers to end the savage austerity measures of the government. It is now threatening key foreign policy imperatives centred on an escalation of NATO's war against Russia and hostile targeting of China.

Ellwood, chair of the defence select committee, denounced striking rail workers as "Putin's friends" and insisted that industrial action be "brought to a halt" so that the UK can successfully pursue NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine.

Speaking to *Sky News*, he said, "I think Russia must be enjoying this self-inflicted distraction, pleased to see that the one government in Europe that is actually standing up to Putin is

completely distracted in this way... I say to the unions, 'please don't be Putin's friend, return to the talks today so we can get the country moving again.'"

Ellwood is a former captain in the Royal Green Jackets and one of several former military figures in the upper echelons of the Tory Party. Together with the chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee Tom Tugendhat and Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, he has been touted as a possible successor to Johnson.

One day before Ellwood's remarks, Johnson used his cabinet meeting to issue a public statement linking waging war in Ukraine with the defeat of the rail strikes. He warned of the danger of "Ukraine fatigue," vowing to ensure "fresh political, military and financial support" to the Kiev regime and to "drain the grain from Ukraine"—a boast that implies direct military intervention.

He insisted the UK remain "steadfast," imposing the necessary "fiscal discipline" by suppressing wage demands and pushing through savage cuts in the rail industry and everywhere else.

For weeks leading up to the strikes, the Tory press was filled with denunciations of rail workers and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) as "Putin's stooges." Ellwood's remarks are a decisive return to these attacks.

Class war at home

The struggle by the working class against the worst cost-of-living catastrophe in a generation—for jobs, improved wages and to protect essential services—is inextricably connected to the struggle against war. The disaster confronting millions of people has been decades in the making but has been brought to a new pitch of intensity, first by the impact of the pandemic and now the war in Ukraine.

The Johnson government used the pandemic to implement a massive transfer of social wealth to the major corporations, while imposing a herd immunity policy that killed 200,000 people and left millions with long-term illness. They are determined to make the working class pay for this with the destruction of their livelihoods.

Launching war against Russia and escalating tensions with China by these same criminals are the means by which the US, UK and other imperialist powers seek to capture the massive resources of

Russia for themselves and eliminate China as a major competitor.

The price for war too must be paid by the working class. It has already helped to push inflation in the UK above 9 percent CPI and 11.7 percent RPI. The figure is expected to continue rising throughout the rest of the year. The biggest push factors in inflation are oil, gas, wheat and mineral resources, all impacted directly by the war in Ukraine and sanctions against Russia.

War abroad means class war at home. The offensive of the government and the major corporations must be stepped up. The government's plans for the reprivatisation of the rail network involves an initial 2,900 job losses, wage suppression and the slashing of pensions. Civil servants face the loss of 25 percent of the workforce, or 90,000 jobs.

This necessitates organised state repression. Just as Thatcher's depiction of the miners as "the enemy within" heralded a massive state offensive involving 13,000 arrests, 200 imprisonments, nearly 1,000 sackings, two deaths on picket lines and three digging for coal, so too the depiction of rail workers as "Putin's friends" prepares the way for the full mobilisation of the state—this time against the entire working class. The government has already pledged to mobilise agency workers as a scab labour force and to bring in minimum service provisions that would mean the criminalisation of strikes in all essential services.

Defeat the conspiracy of the Labour Party and the trade unions

Workers face another political enemy in the trade union and Labour Party bureaucracy. They too are seeking to reprise the role they played in 1984-85 in isolating a key struggle by the working class in collusion with the Tories.

The RMT has been forced to call a strike by massive popular pressure. But there is no doubt that behind the scenes its leadership has been told in no uncertain terms that it must end this strike as soon as possible.

Last week, the RMT offered direct talks with the government "without any preconditions," while making clear it would accept mass redundancies, so long as they are "voluntary," and only a below-inflation pay award of 7 percent or perhaps less in return.

Within hours, it became clear that this offer had been discussed and agreed by the TUC, which orchestrated a letter to the government signed by TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady and the leaders of the 14 biggest UK unions supporting talks with the RMT as a means of preventing industrial action.

Labour is even more naked in its hostility to the striving of the working class to take on the Johnson government, denouncing "Tory strikes" and stressing its opposition to an action it says it could have prevented using the trade unions.

In an extraordinary demonstration of Labour's extreme right-wing character, Labour Leader Keir Starmer ordered his frontbenchers not to attend rail strike picket lines. Five that did so have been told to apologise and are threatened with disciplinary action.

Labour's hostility to the rail strikes is intimately connected to its support for war against Russia. As the Ukraine war broke out, Starmer demanded that the "British public" must be prepared to "make sacrifices" in the face of "economic pain." As with his threat to punish his MPs for visiting picket lines, in May he told Labour's Corbynite rump of 11 MPs that they would be expelled if they did not withdraw support for the Stop the War Coalition and show their "unshakeable support for NATO." The Corbynite "left" caved immediately.

Build rank-and-file committees and fight for a general strike

The conditions exist for the working class to bring down the Johnson government. In workplaces and on picket lines across the country, talk is of strikes amid an outpouring of sympathy for the rail workers. Given a perspective on which to fight, the working class can unite its struggles in a general strike.

To do so the Socialist Equality Party and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees urge workers to form their own rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace. This would open a new road for the class struggle, in which trusted representatives of the working class would take the lead and defeat the efforts of the bureaucrats to sabotage every fightback.

In the past weeks, general strikes have been carried out in Greece, Italy and Belgium. Waves of industrial action have rolled through Turkey. On Monday, another national strike was held in Belgium, with the capital Brussels brought to a standstill as 80,000 workers demonstrated. Strikes at Brussels Airlines will be held on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, and at Ryanair on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Belgian Ryanair workers will be joined by workers in Spain, Italy, Portugal and France throughout the week and EasyJet workers in Spain will walk out next Friday.

A determined industrial and political offensive by the British working class, rallying behind the rail workers, would become a powerful focus and inspiration for the developing class struggles in Europe and internationally. It would halt the warmongers in their tracks.



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