

UK Johnson government imposes massive real-terms pay cut on millions as unions suppress strikes

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The Conservative government, immediately following the resignation of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the triggering of a leadership contest, last week announced massive de facto pay cuts for more than two million public sector workers.

On the same day that Retail Price Index (RPI) inflation rose to almost 12 percent, Tory ministers announced that more than a million National Health Service (NHS) workers will receive a pay rise equivalent to just 4 percent, or £1,400 annually. Consultant doctors will receive a pay award of just 4.5 percent. According to research by the Trades Union Congress, hospital porters' real-terms pay will be down £200 this year, nurses will suffer a £1,100 cut and paramedics a cut of £1,500.

All teachers, except the newly qualified outside London, will receive only a 5 percent increase.

None of the miserly pay deals above the originally planned 3 percent will be paid for by new funding. Any increases above 3 percent must therefore come from cuts to departmental budgets. The Institute for Fiscal Studies calculates these will total £7 billion.

The government was emboldened by the fact that hardly any industrial action was underway. With the exception of a few thousand criminal lawyers, no national strikes have taken place for weeks.

From the start of the year, figures in ruling circles have raised the threat of a "summer of discontent" with workers resisting a new offensive on their wages, pensions, working conditions and jobs. Instead, the unions have stymied a movement that had the potential to throw out Johnson's entire government.

Only token strikes, including the just three days of national strike action by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union, have taken place.

How grotesque is this betrayal by the trade unions was

made clear in a piece in Sunday's *Observer*, the sister newspaper of the *Guardian*. The article's headline, "Paralysis from Tory leadership race is damaging pay talks, say doctors and teachers", is misleading as the "doctors and teachers" referred to are leading figures in the union bureaucracy.

Observer Policy Editor Michael Savage comments, "Figures from both teaching and health unions said that with a new prime minister due to be in place by the autumn, they feared the temporary status of the current government was affecting the ability of ministers to take the necessary decisions."

He continues, "Kevin Courtney, joint general secretary of the National Education Union (NEU), said that when challenged over funding increases for next year in a call last week, newly appointed education secretary James Cleverly 'wouldn't answer straightforwardly and had the very good excuse that he might not be secretary of state'.

The article cites Courtney's response, "This does indicate that they're not firing on all cylinders, and that's not good... They are not dealing with the things that matter."

Courtney, who jointly leads a union of nearly half a million members, speaks for the union bureaucracy everywhere. He is declaring that the desperate situation facing millions of workers can only be resolved in negotiation with a functional Tory government, for which they must wait until September!

It would seem unarguable to any worker that the crisis of the Tory government be used to press home a struggle against it. But the NEU and other unions will not do this because they are not adversaries of the government, but its de facto partners. They have called virtually no action halfway into the year to ensure that the "summer of discontent" did not become a summer of action. And they

fear any false step on their part, giving workers' anger an outlet, will unleash a movement beyond their control during a crisis of rule facing the ruling class.

Already, the *Observer* admits on the unions' behalf, strikes in the public sector are disappearing over the horizon to the "autumn and the new year", which it claims, "could see an unprecedented wave of strike action among teaching staff and doctors after a pay deal that is set to see their wages falling in real terms in the face of the cost of living crisis."

Dispensing with the rhetoric, what is being prepared by the unions is an autumn and winter of evasions, betrayals and the suppression of every struggle that seriously threatens whichever right-wing monster—likely the Thatcher-worshipping Liz Truss or near billionaire Rishi Sunak—emerges as Johnson's successor.

Britain's main pseudo-left outfits the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP)—who count among their membership a significant number of local, regional and national union officials—have responded by doubling down in defence of these organisations.

The SWP offered advice to Courtney et al that they should try to present a more militant face and preserve whatever dwindling support they retain among workers. They wrote July 19, "The all too familiar pattern—consultative ballots followed by weeks of talks, then formal postal ballots followed by weeks more talks and maybe a strike in months afterwards—falls far short. At the very least there should be more strikes and protests."

The SP wrote on July 20 of its efforts to encourage a more militant response, "The leadership of the union in the 'NEU Left' grouping previously told us [national action] was fantasy, and that in reality only school-by-school action was possible. But we argued that the union needed to lead from the front as well as build from below.

"Now we must build a mighty campaign, starting immediately, and then getting ready to hit the ground running when the schools start in September."

These organisations deliberately avoid the central question: *why* has there been no co-ordinated, national strike action organised by the unions this year, despite the eagerness of millions to take the fight to the Tories as expressed in a series of near unanimous ballots for strikes among rail, bus, postal and other key sections of workers.

Calls for the union leaders to act as if they are actually in a fight against the government and the employers are used to conceal the actual character of the trade unions as organised opponents of the class struggle—an industrial

police force for the corporations and the state.

In opposition to this agenda of "pressure from below", which can only result again in the snuffing out of every struggle, the Socialist Equality Party calls for the building a network of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union bureaucracy aimed at breaking their domination of the class struggle.

Central to the chloroforming of the working class by the unions and their pseudo-left apologists is their covering over the fact that every significant dispute, especially in the public sector, is a struggle against the government. They therefore offer no perspective for the working class to intervene in the government crisis, even under the extraordinary conditions of the resignation of a prime minister.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to take up the demand for an immediate general election so that that the Labour Party-trade union conspiracy to preserve the Tory government and its policies can be defeated.

This call is coupled with the fight for a general strike, organised through rank-and-file committees.

The SEP explains, "We will use the general election to make the case for strikes, mass protests and the organisation of a general strike to stop the war, force the adoption of a zero-COVID policy, and build support for a socialist alternative to capitalism. This is essential under conditions in which the trade unions are suppressing a growing strike movement and preventing any political challenge to the Tory government and to Labour's right-wing policies.

"We will give a voice to the millions of workers whose views are never asked for, let alone represented politically."



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