ALL TOGETHER NOW THE STRIKES CAN WIN

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The battle lines have been drawn.

Unjum Mirza analyses the current situation with industrial action, and offers a strategy for a class-wide victory

The humiliating by-election result in Chester offers the reason why the Tories fear an election: they suffered their worst result in the city since 1832. But the crisis runs much deeper. On the very day local constituents cast their vote, the Telegraph whined, ‘Strikes on every day until Christmas’. Thousands of rail workers, postal workers, nurses, civil servants, lecturers, cleaners and teachers are just some of the groups of workers taking or set to take industrial action in the coming days and weeks and into the new year.

The Financial Times reports the ascendant curve of industrial action, national, regional and local, has resulted in Rishi Sunak creating ‘a dedicated unit to co-ordinate the UK government’s response to a threatened “winter of discontent” as more than 10,000 ambulance workers became the latest public sector employees to vote for strike action’.

The richest prime minister in the country’s history with his chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, are, in cahoots with the employers, set on a collision course with millions of workers and the poor to make us pay for the crisis.

The severity of the economic climate could not be starker, with the Bank of England warning the UK is facing its longest recession since records began. Inflation is at 14.2%, the cost of food higher still, energy costing a third of income for some four million households, and there is a constant attack on public services. The battle lines have been drawn.

Workers’ revolt

The wave of strikes responding to the cost-of-living crisis shifted tempo six months ago with a series of rail strikes spearheaded by the RMT in June. But thus far, the trade unions have been unable to draw in wider mass forces of the working class to force a victory.

On the one hand, ever more groups of workers are joining in the struggle, particularly now with the RCN nurses, GMB, Unison and Unite ambulance workers, and PCS civil servants setting strike dates. The NEU and FBU have strike ballots set to close early in the new year. The potential for a class-wide victory is very real indeed.

On the other hand, government employers are still hanging tough, refusing serious negotiations. This is not a time for union leaderships to retreat from strike action. Strikes were called off for ‘intensive talks’ which haven’t succeeded.

Some disputes are being settled below inflation, which can threaten sectional division. For instance, in response to the recent BT deal recommended by the CWU national executive, a rank-and-file worker said, “I’ve done the sums and it doesn’t add up. This ain’t gonna pay the bills, it ain’t even gonna come close. This is what ‘partnership’ gets you.”

BT workers should reject the deal. But it is not just at BT. Too often we’ve seen strike dates named, but disputes settled and, similarly, actual strikes settled for less than what they could have achieved, particularly if they had been coordinated to spread the action within their respective sectors, let alone across sectors.

Too often we’ve seen pay disputes make advances on employers’ initial offers only to settle below RPI, albeit offering a slightly greater percentage increase for those less well paid. Given the cost-of-living crisis, no one’s pay rises keep up with prices. No amount of ‘creative accounting’ can disguise that fact.

As one trade-union national executive member said, “we’re putting offers to members to consider and we know they’re well short of RPI let alone food prices, which are much higher, and energy costs. The offers don’t even touch the sides.”

All out: Coordination and escalation

The autumn Budget signalled a general attack on working people and the poor: a

Trade unionists must be at the heart of the fight for peace

TERINA HINE

The anti-war movement and the trade unions have a long history of working together. This is not surprising; war is a class issue.

From the moment the Stop the War Coalition was formed, trade unions offered support. When over a million took to the streets to march against the Iraq War, tens of thousands of union members joined the protest.

But earlier this year at the Trades Union Congress, a resolution was narrowly passed that backed increased military spending. The resolution could have been lifted from the Tory warmonger playbook. The vote was tight. PCS, NEU, RMT, CWU and FBU all voted against, but that it passed at all is a serious setback for the movement.

The vote took place against the background of the Ukraine War and attacks on Stop the War by Labour. It seems politicians of all colours are incapable of joining the dots between cuts in public services and hikes in military spending. Britain has poured more arms into
have been drawn

generalised experience across the working class resulting in a broad level of sympathy and solidarity with the strikes. At the same time, the Tories are in disarray. The Tory party remains internally at war, unstable and unpredictable. This is the time to hit them hard.

The coordinated national strikes on 1 October across the rail, post and docks involving Aslef, RMT, TSSA, Unite and CWU offered a glimpse of our immense power. That is the model to which we need to return and escalate to win.

Similarly, on a regional level, the Liverpool dockers’ strike offers an important example of how to win. The combination of sustained strike action (five weeks), mass picketing and participation, and solidarity from the wider working class, secured a pay deal of 14.3% to 18.5%. The original offer was 5%. The strike has also scrapped the 132 redundancies announced by bosses during the action.

To limit the struggle runs the inherent risks of fragmentation and sectionalism. An industrial strategy that incorporates both coordination and escalation – an all-out strike – within and across unions and sectors is vital. It can provide the mass and acceleration sufficient to generate the force needed to prise open the fissures and fractures among the government and employers.

Co-ordinated and escalated industrial action needs to be combined with united protests on the streets to forge a national movement as a vehicle to fight for our wider independent class interests. That is why the People’s Assembly demonstration on 5 November was so important.

The Tories fear the possibilities of generalised resistance. A united working-class movement on the streets against the cost of living, climate change and war can also deliver the solidarity to the picket lines necessary for the strikes to win.

Rank and file

The current strategy of attrition and limited action finds the trade-union leaders trapped between intransigent employers and government – with whom they’d like to negotiate a settlement and meet some semblance of their demands – and the fear of escalating action in order actually to win these disputes outright.

As the executive member quoted above added, “We could tear this government apart. There has to be a national show of strength and that has to come through the TUC.”

On the ground, we’ve witnessed some brilliant local and sector rank-and-file activity and solidarity in delivering strike votes, picket lines and secondary action. Our weakness, however, is that nowhere have we been able thus far to transform short-term action into an independent and permanent rank-and-file political force.

We really do need to step up to the plate and organise to win, going beyond the debilitating sectionalism and fragmentation that stifles our power to transcend Ukraine and the wider region that any other country bar the US. This war has caused death and misery to Ukrainian people, and the prospect of nuclear escalation is as real as it is frightening. Yet rather than pursuing a strategy for peace, our government has hindered negotiations at every turn.

We are currently experiencing the biggest cost-of-living crisis in decades and inflation is at a forty-year high. But while millions are going cold and hungry this winter, the magic money tree for war continues to bear fruit.

As the FBU’s Jamie Newell said, “I’ve never heard a general say they couldn’t afford to bomb someone, and we’ve just seen Rishi Sunak gift another £50m to Ukraine, but he won’t fund public services and key workers striking for fair pay.”

Foreign policy and defence, as well as the domestic agenda, are class issues. We know that working people are the main victims of war, that there is a worker at both ends of the bayonet. And when they tell us it is going to be a ‘tough road ahead’, we know that it is working people and transform the working class as an effective agent of fundamental change.

We need both unity across the unions and the wider working class, while simultaneously creating a movement which can politically challenge any leadership compromises with the employers. This wave of strikes has to be a turning point where the unions roll back government and employer attacks and press our demands.

This is a critical factor in the struggles taking place now and for those yet to come. The moments that we’ve got it right, the level of direct action and direct democracy, of solidarity, respect and dignity between and across groups of workers, has on occasion also spilt over from the workplace and into the streets.

It is this that opens the possibilities for a restructure of society along more egalitarian, collective and democratic lines. In a word, socialism.

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It is almost certain that Labour will win the next general election. For months, the party has consistently maintained spectacular polling leads that are reminiscent of the mid-1990s.

The latest polls indicate that the Tory meltdown wasn’t just about Liz Truss, with Rishi Sunak’s leadership failing to close the gap. The Tory crisis runs deep. It is revealing that at least a dozen Tory MPs have already confirmed that they will not be standing again. The rats are deserting the sinking ship.

It is sometimes said that opposition parties don’t win elections, but rather that governing parties lose them. That has never been more pertinent than now. Labour’s excellent polling is a result of deep disaffection with the Tories, not an endorsement of Keir Starmer’s dismally uninspiring leadership.

Nobody who wants an alternative to this Tory government’s rotten policies should rely on Labour. An election might not take place until 2024. Millions of working-class people are hurting now. We cannot afford to wait.

Labour’s current parliamentary opposition to the government is exceptionally weak. Labour accepts the supposed ‘need’ for ‘pay restraint’, which means real-terms pay cuts. It refuses to support any of the trade unions taking strike action for decent pay. This has been highlighted by the ongoing ban on Labour front benchers joining picket lines.

Labour has absented itself from opposing the Tories in the here and now. It is the trade unions and social movements that are mobilising against the government. This isn’t merely an incompetent failure to rise to the challenge. It is grounded in the party leadership’s political acceptance, with only minor modifications, of the Tories’ agenda.

Labour also offers little sense that it will, in government, chart a different course to Sunak’s Tories. It is now openly acknowledged that Corbyn-led Labour’s 2019 manifesto is null and void, despite Starmer standing for the leadership on the basis of protecting that platform.

In the economic field, Labour has no answer to the problems of poor productivity, insecure jobs, falling living standards and growing inequality. It has no credible alternative to unaffordable housing, under-funded public services or weak public infrastructure.

Labour’s proposals for addressing climate change are inadequate: a version of a ‘Green New Deal’ gutted of ambition or any challenge to the power of multinational capital. Its foreign policy is zealously pro-Washington; we are seeing the resurrection of a bipartisan consensus with the Tories on big international issues from arms spending to support for Israeli apartheid.

This policy shift is accompanied by a virulent and relentless war on the left. Socialists have been expelled or disciplined, a witch-hunt symbolised by the refusal to restore the whip to former leader Jeremy Corbyn. There have been efforts to de-select socialist MPs, while selections for target seats have seen left-wingers blocked.

Labour cannot be won to a better course in the foreseeable future. Socialists’ time and resources are better directed towards building mass movements, coordinated strike action and the beginnings of a left-wing political alternative to Labour.

Sir Keir’s party isn’t going to capture the anger, asserts Alex Snowdon