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Britain

Strikes and solidarity - hot autumn in Britain ?

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On Monday 5 September, the result of the contest for the British Conservative Party leadership was announced following Boris Johnson's resignation from that position on 7 July. [Liz Truss](#), the continuity candidate, won the prize of becoming both the next Tory leader and the next British Prime Minister albeit by a smaller margin than she would have hoped. She becomes leader of a divided party and Prime Minister of a country facing a major cost of living crisis and rising industrial action.

One of the notable things about the long drawn out competition between Truss and former Chancellor Rishi Sunak, the last two left standing in the race, is how little their debates had to say about the issue animating the majority of people in Britain – the galloping rate of inflation meaning that millions of people are desperately worried about whether they will be able to feed themselves and those they live with and keep their homes warm on the depths of winter.

While the Tory candidates have been vying with each other as to who can put forward the most rightwing profile and policies on foreign, social and economic policy, thousands and thousands of trade unionists in Britain have been striking to defend their living standards and conditions.

Inflation on essential goods is extraordinarily high. Petrol and diesel prices, which impact some people directly especially in areas where public transport is scarce and also impacts on other costs has been rising since last autumn. In August 2022 food prices rose by 5.5 per cent from 4.4 per cent in July, while fresh food rose 10.5 per cent. And this is in the context that the number of households [using food banks](#) in Britain had grown significantly in the last decade, reaching more than [2.5 million](#) at the peak of the Covid pandemic. And it is not only people who are unemployed who use food banks – a [number of hospitals](#) have set up food banks for staff this year as has [one call centre for staff](#) in telecommunications – in-work poverty is being normalised.

This is bad enough, but it is calamitous when it is combined with what is happening with the prices people have to pay for energy – gas and electricity – in their homes. Britain seems to have a unique system to set tariffs for this. Since 1 January 2019 there has been a 'price cap', a ceiling on what you need pay for each unit of gas and electricity used plus a maximum daily standing charge to be connected to the grid. Many people took little notice of this until earlier this year when in April the cap rose by a massive 54 per cent. From 1 October it will rise again by 80 per cent - and from here on in will change every 3 months rather than previously every six.

Such astronomical hikes are obviously hitting those on low incomes hardest – those not in paid work or on zero hours contracts in particular. One notable point of fury is that many people – usually those on lowest incomes have devices through which they pay for energy in advance – and the rates for this 'service' is higher than that for everyone else. Another concern is the level of the standing charge which means that even if you do not use a fuel at all your bills have gone through the ceiling. Over recent months the media has been full of heartrending stories of people who are already in desperate situations before the October hike – and terrified about what will happen on then.

But as the spread of food banks shows many in work are suffering too. There are [more than 1 million people on zero hours contracts](#) and more than [2 million people](#) paid at or below the minimum wage – a level well below what is needed to live on even before inflation. Many of the [8.2 million part time workers](#), even those on reasonable hourly rates, will be finding it hard to make ends meet. But in fact many workers in what are traditionally well paid jobs are feeling the squeeze too – hence the significant rise in strike levels.

Of course, taking industrial action is the most effective way for trade unions to defend the pay and conditions of their members. But in Britain it's a habit that many trade unions have got out of for a long time as these [statistics show](#). A major reason for this is the draconian [anti-union laws](#) that workers in Britain face, the most restrictive in Europe.

Tory anti-union offensive

The current laws were introduced by Tory governments through six acts of Parliament between 1980-1993 – but were not repealed by Labour when they were in office either. (Indeed Blair boasted that he was happy about them.) This means that in order to strike at least 50 per cent of those eligible to vote have voted and at least 50 per of those voting have voted to strike. Further in the case of 'important public services', at least 40 per cent of those eligible to vote must have voted to support the action. There are various other hoops in terms of notice to employers – and significant penalties in terms of substantial fines to trade unions.

But while the anti-union laws present a very significant hurdle so too has the political state of the trade union movement. The Tory government led by [Margaret Thatcher](#) consciously set out to eliminate trade union militancy not only through legal changes but through defeating the strongest unions industrially as well. The [1984-5 miner's strike](#) was the most emblematic of these, but there were other important battles such as the [1986 printers strike at Wapping](#)

When Thatcher came to power 13.2 million workers in Britain were members of trade unions and by 2019 [this had halved to 6.9 million](#). [1].

And the problem went far beyond raw numbers. The average age of trade unionists has been growing - almost 40 per cent of union members are over 50 –and the rate of unionisation amongst young people is desperately low with less than one in ten 16-24 year olds being members of a union. At the same time and not surprisingly, the level of union involvement has fallen. In the 1970s and 1980s there was a strong layer of shop stewards – elected workplace representatives – in many unions whereas that has declined since the defeat of the miners' strike. Unions have been more likely to recruit on the basis of selling insurance than workplace organising.

Young people are more likely to work on the gig economy where traditional unions are unlikely to organise – and even beyond that they have not seen unions standing up for their members. But there have been some shifts. A number of small independent unions not affiliated to the unitary TUC have built themselves over recent years by organising amongst precarious workers including significant numbers of Black and migrant members from whom their activists are often drawn. [2] A few traditional unions have also made advances – notably the big Education union [the NEU](#) who organised a major campaign to make schools safe during the Covid pandemic and in the process recruited not only thousands of new members but hundreds of new workplace representatives.

Despite the hurdles the weak state of the trade union movement overall posed by this summer, huge numbers of workers were at breaking point and a significant number of trade union leaders – some relatively new and others more established had decided that, with a zombie government focused on an election campaign and a supine opposition, the responsibility for a fightback lay with them. We have therefore seen the greatest rise in industrial action in Britain for many decades over the last few months – and the wave is far from over.

Transport

The rail union RMT was one of the first off the blocks, calling strikes for 3 days in June across most of the individual

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rail companies and network rail after voting almost 9-1 in favour of strike action on a 71 per cent turnout.

Their level of fury is not surprising given that during the pandemic, rail bosses took home £1m pay packets and rail companies made in excess of £500 million a year in private profits.

As well as demanding a fair wage rise, in a situation where the employers were not offering any increase at all and where many people's pay had been frozen for two or three years, the action was also taken against the threat of large numbers of compulsory redundancies. Management try to sell this as 'modernisation' - a pattern in many of the current disputes – but while this rhetoric is repeated without challenge by much of the mainstream media it's not cutting through to undermine remarkably high public support for the dispute.

The RMT is not a huge union with around 80,000 members but has a left-wing reputation, particularly under the leadership of Bob Crow who was general secretary from 2002 until his untimely death in 2014. Mick Lynch, the current General Secretary who took office in 2021 was not well known outside the union before the dispute, but that has changed dramatically during the summer.

Lynch has been widely interviewed by the media, with many confrontational pundits hoping to undermine the union's case. In fact, they have had the opposite effect as Lynch has responded calmly and clearly. The Independent columnist who responded that "Mick Lynch has done more for workers in two days than Starmer has in two years" was absolutely accurate. [3].

One of Lynch's constant messages is directed at the Tory government who have refused to get involved in talks involving the unions and the train companies. Lynch has [written](#) to current Transport Secretary Grant Shapps, saying: "Your government has made the decision to use taxpayers' money to bail out private train companies from being liable for revenue lost because of industrial action on the condition the same companies comply with government instructions to hold down pay, cut thousands of safety critical rail jobs, introduce driver only trains and close ticket offices across the network." He continued the union had calculated that, including the previous and forthcoming industrial action, more than £120m of taxpayers' money had been used to "bail out" private train companies to date.

But as well as trying to paint itself as a disinterested observer by refusing to participate in talks, the Tories have certainly been quick not only to attack the unions in the media but to threaten further anti-union laws, including threats from Shapps to bring in [fire and rehire](#) against the transport unions. [4]

The RMT is one of three main unions organising the rail industry. It organises people in all grades in the industry. The other unions are [Aslef](#) which describes itself as 'the craft union for train drivers' and has around 21,000 members and [TSSA](#) which traditionally organises people who do administrative jobs and has around 18,000 members. After the June strikes, the RMT announced more dates for action on 27 July, 18 August and 20 August and were joined by TSSA members on these dates. At this point Aslef was very much doing their own thing with their biggest action on 13 August. [5] Looking to the future, RMT has called strikes for 15 and 17 September. Aslef will also be striking on the first of these while TSSA has called action for 26 and 27 September.

Rail is not the only important sector in which transport workers are organised – bus workers also play a significant role. Unite, one of Britain's largest unions with 1.4 million members, organises many of them. [The union [points out](#) "Since 2009, well over 3,000 local authority supported bus services have been cut or reduced. In London alone last year, 41 routes were cut. According to the Campaign for Better Transport, some areas are losing over 50 per cent – or even 100 per cent - of their council-funded bus services. Others are cutting all weekend and evening services. And fares are often just too high for low waged workers."

In the middle of June [Transport for London \(TFL\)](#) – the body responsible for bus, rail and underground travel in London – announced a six week consultation over proposals to cut sixteen bus routes, around 4 per cent of the network. Unite argues this would have seen a [loss of 800 drivers](#) and would also have significantly lengthened many people's journeys. People were particularly angry about the potential impact on disabled people and on women travelling alone having to change buses – as well as the fact that it would have increased the cost for many travellers.

The union, together with local Trades Councils [\[6\]](#) passenger groups and some local Labour activists organised a high profile campaign over the summer including a number of marches in different parts of the capital including a [brief occupation of TFL's office](#), and a mass responses to the consultation which forced the extension of the consultation.

TFL have always argued that the cuts they were proposing to bus services – and also to underground workers' conditions were a result of a lack of funding from central government, however they did nothing publicly to either join the campaign of workers and passengers or launch their own. This was despite the fact that prior to the pandemic central government had ended all funding to them and only provided emergency funding during that period. No comparable capital city runs a transport system without central subsidy.

On 30 August, TFL and the government announced they had agreed [a funding settlement](#) albeit one that only lasts for eighteenth months and where the money of 3.6 billion does not fill the gap. The settlement has been rejected by all the rail unions and it seems unlikely that Unite will not follow suit. Certainly the huge level of support from across the trade union movement and appetite for further co-ordinated action was evident at the massive rally organised by the RMT on August 31 with speakers from all of the transport unions. [\[7\]](#)

While Unite's campaign to defend London buses has primarily been on the streets and amongst communities, this is not to say that the union has not been organising industrial action. General Secretary Sharon Graham has been in office [for just over a year having been elected on a platform of taking the union back to the workplace](#). Her balance sheet of that time is that under her leadership 76,000 members in dispute have won "£150 million".

Buses, bins, docks...

Unite is a multi-industry union, organising across many sectors which poses challenges as well as opportunities. As well as their campaign against cuts in bus services in London, [2000 bus workers took two days of strike over pay towards the end of August](#). Bus workers elsewhere in Britain have been involved in industrial action, most notably a victory by 300 [First Direct workers in Manchester](#) who won an 8.9 per cent increase plus a lump sum payment in February after 8 days of industrial action

One strategy the union has adopted under Graham's leadership seems to have been to ballot relatively small groups of workers where enough work has been done to be confident of a yes vote – and then try to build on that to spread action to other groups in similar positions. One high profile dispute won by the union was by [Coventry bin drivers](#) who won a pay deal worth up to 12.9 per cent after seven months of continuous strike action. The settlement also saw the dropping of [disciplinary action against shop steward Pete Randle](#) – the Labour councils' attempt at victimisation was beaten back.

Over 1,900 dock workers at Britain's largest container port of [Felixstowe took eight days strike action in late August](#) to demand a better pay deal than the 7 per cent on the table from a company raking in profits, receiving [international solidarity](#) from dockers on the west coast of the US. 560 workers at the port of Liverpool [will strike](#) for two weeks from September 19 over the same pay offer. Again Graham focuses on the massive profits of their owner, in this case

billionaire owned port operator MDHC who made £30 million profits in 2021.

Postal workers

Friday 26 August saw the biggest strike yet of this summer of struggle when over 115,000 postal workers took action to demand a pay rise that covers the current cost of living crisis. Postal workers also struck on 31 August and will be out again on 8 and 9 September.

This follows the Communication Workers' Union (CWU)'s recent ballot for strike action by postal workers, which saw members vote by 97.6 per cent on a 77 per cent turnout to take action. The union points out that this was the biggest mandate for strike action reached since the implementation of the 2016 Trade Union Act. It's the first national strike on the post for twelve years in a sector where is a tradition of local unofficial action.

Rather than negotiate with the union, the management of Royal Mail Group decided to impose a 2 per cent pay rise on its employees through executive action, those same employees who were given key worker status at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Even worse, management is claiming – and too much of the rightwing media are repeating – that they have offered 5.5 per cent. Even if it were true, it would not meet the real costs workers are facing with inflation – but in fact it's a blatant lie. It's true that they have made an offer of 1.5 per cent but that is strictly conditional on postal workers agreeing to changes which would rip up their terms and conditions.

This is reminiscent of what is happening in other industries – notably transport – bosses are raking in huge profits for themselves and shareholders while trying to force even the most organised sections of the working class to work in even more exploitative conditions. This is the context in which the CWU ran a second ballot to enter into a formal dispute with management over terms and conditions. Members voted by 98.7 per cent on a 72.2 per cent turnout.

As CWU General Secretary Dave Ward said

When Royal Mail bosses are raking in £758 million in profit and shareholders pocketing in excess of £400 million, our members wo not accept pleas of poverty from the company. Postal workers wo not meekly accept their living standards being hammered by greedy business leaders who are completely out of touch with modern Britain. They are sick of corporate failure getting rewarded again and again.

The fact that the other major section of the union in telecoms is engaged in a very similar battle against an imposed pay award – this time a flat rate of £1500 which again represents a real terms pay cut – sees the union campaigning together – and both sections came out on August 31. And a smaller group of the union's members, working for Post Office counters, face even more intransigent management who imposed a pay freeze for 2021-22 and a completely inadequate offer of 3 per cent plus a one-off payment of £500 for 2022/23. They were on strike on Friday as they have been several times already this summer.

Patchwork

If the disputes in transport and those organised by the CWU and Unite have those which have shifted the political situation most clearly, they have not been the only ones worth noting. From 5 September, [criminal barristers](#) – not a group of workers from whom one would expect militancy – started indefinite strike action to demand a 25 per cent increase in their fees. But successive governments have [cut fees payable](#) for criminal legal aid work reducing value of the fees paid for this work by 30 per cent in the past 15 years. The impact has been sharpest on new entrants to the profession who can expect a median income of £12,200 a year for long hours at an hourly rate of £6.40 – below the minimum wage.

There have also been a number of unofficial walkouts including by [Amazon warehouse workers](#) in a number of localities across Britain. Both Unite and the [GMB](#) union organise some workers at Amazon and the latter is apparently preparing for official action [at one site](#)

Inspiration

One of the noticeable things about this summer's picket lines has been the number of young workers taking action for the first time, challenging both the image and the reality that trade unions are a thing of the past. At a major rally organised by the CWU one of the platform speakers commented that he felt confident that this meant the future of the trade union movement was safe in their hands.

Pickets have also been larger than I can remember for decades – no sign that people are intimidated by the anti-union laws that officially restrict pickets to six. And they have taken place in areas where they have not taken place for decades – in one case apparently since the 1926 General Strike. This increasing militancy is important because certainly for large groups of workers battling for adequate pay settlements to beat inflation their fight is likely to be a long one.

Another positive dynamic coming in particular from the CWU has been the launch together with a number of community campaigns and a couple of left Labour MPs of [Enough is Enough](#) campaigning not only around fair pay rises for workers but around slashing energy bills, ending food poverty, a decent home for all and taxing the rich. [8] This initiative has tapped into a rich seam of enthusiasm caused by revulsion with Tory and bosses attacks – and a frustration with the failure of Labour under Starmer to provide any leadership with more than 300,000 people signing up within days of its launch.

Britain traditionally has been a place where trade unions by and large have left what they see as politics to the Labour Party whether in government or in opposition. Union members have been told not to take militant action for fear that this will prevent the election of a Labour government. But in the face of the depth of the current crisis, and the further attacks we expect coming down the tracks very quickly under Liz Truss, a shift from this position from at least a significant section of the trade union movement could not come soon enough.

5 September 2022

PS:

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[1] There has been some small improvement in figures in some years since then, especially amongst women workers in the public sector, but nothing like enough to reverse the decline

[2] There are three significant unions here [United Voices of the World IWGB](#) and [IWW.uk](#),

[3] Keir Starmer is the leader of the opposition Labour Party who instructed his leading MPs not to join union picket lines and has not supported the strikes.

[4] Free Our Unions, "[New briefing on threatened new anti-strike laws](#)".

[5] They did take action earlier at one or two individual companies.

[6] Trades Councils bring together activists from different unions in a particular locality.

[7] Listen to [Mick Lynch's speech](#) and a very powerful political speech from [guest speaker Bernie Sanders](#).

[8] Phil Hearse "[Million say 'enough is enough', as Tories plan massive attack](#)".