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Britain

Strike action continues with significant public support

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I spent part of Xmas morning with strikers. I don't remember this happening before in all my decades of political activity. I didn't actually have to leave the house as this was a zoom meeting organised by the civil service union PCS to bring solidarity to their members in different sectors taking industrial action over the holiday period.

Even if I hadn't done that, I would certainly have known about PCS members in Border Force – the people who check passports – striking over the holiday. Every news bulletin on the mainstream media in the run up to Xmas had an item about it.

Despite the fact that the Tory government and their friends in the media have been constantly pumping out anti-union rhetoric ever since rail workers started their campaign of industrial action early in the summer, public support remains high.

Support is particularly high for health workers, after nurses belonging to the Royal College of Nurses took their first ever strike action for two separate days in December – and subsequently announced action for two days together in January. [\[1\]](#) Ambulance workers from 3 unions also struck in December and some will strike again in January.

An opinion poll published on 14 December showed 60% per cent support for striking NHS staff, with firefighters, teachers, postal workers and refuse collectors also having a higher rate of support than of opposition. Nevertheless, these are lower rates of support than in September-October. [\[2\]](#)

Public backing particularly for health and transport workers is based on two related facts. Working-class people blame the Tory government for the cost-of-living crisis and at the same time hold them responsible for the state of both the NHS and public transport. Even where support for strikes has fallen, more people hold the government responsible than they do anyone else. The Tories have refused to even discuss pay with workers where they are the employer – and have clearly been leaning on major employers where they are not.

The first attack on Border Force workers by the Tories and the media was that strikers were ruining everyone's Xmas. They tried the same line earlier with postal and transport workers.

The next trick was to claim that the Border Force strike was having no impact as queues at airports were not lengthening – suggesting that their strike was a failure. This gave PCS General Secretary Mark Serwotka the opportunity in interviews across the festive period to argue that the government was wasting vast sums of public money bringing in the military to scab – while in fact not properly checking people's documents.

Serwotka also took the opportunity to speak about the real situation facing many civil servants. The media are happy to perpetrate an image of them as comfortably off older men in suits, but in fact there are thousands of PCS members dependent on food banks to survive. The RMT railworkers' union leader Mick Lynch did an excellent job in putting the workers' case earlier in this period of industrial militancy and Serwotka is continuing this offensive.

Meanwhile looking forward to the New Year, as well as continuing action from many groups of workers who have been striking over recent months, new groups could be joining the campaign for fair pay. The two unions that organise school teachers are balloting members and results are expected in the second week of January, this could see many thousands more workers taking action. At the same time the much smaller but obviously strategic Fire

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Brigade Union is expected to announce the results of its ballot in the next days. Rumours are circulating that the Trade Union Congress will organise co-ordinating strike action on 1 February. Not a moment before time. One of my New Year's resolutions for 2023 is undoubtedly to spend lots of time on picket lines...

1 January 2023

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[1] *The Guardian*, 17 December 2022 "[Public support for nurses' strike piles pressure on Sunak and divides Tories](#)".

[2] See 14 December 2022 "[Public Support for Strikes Declines in Practice](#)" and 14 December 2022 "[Support for December rail strikes lower than for October action but public opinion remains divided](#)".