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British workers continue to strike for fair pay

In what remains the world's sixth largest economy, UK workers deserve a fair share of the wealth their labour creates

Last year saw a significant upsurge in industrial action in the UK. While comparisons with 1970s-style unrest are overblown, widespread strikes are likely to continue well into 2023 as workers battle the cost-of-living crisis. Amidst these profoundly tough times, the British trade union movement's number one priority is to secure fair pay for working people.

Across the economy, hundreds of thousands of workers are either striking or balloting for industrial action. Among them are rail workers, paramedics, nurses, postal staff, civil servants, border guards, dockers, lecturers, manufacturing workers and many others. Strikes, industrial disputes and trade unions are now big news.

While strike action is always a last resort for workers, a growing number of union members feel they have no alternative. As the representative body for 48 unions and 5.5 million members, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) is supporting workers on strike for a fair deal. They are coordinating industrial action, building public support for striking workers and offering practical assistance to unions involved in disputes. They have also voiced their demands for a pandemic-style support package for working people.

Why are British workers striking?

The immediate trigger for the increase in industrial action is the UK's cost-of-living emergency. Inflation has surged to a 40-year high as food, fuel and energy bills have skyrocketed. Mortgages and rents are increasing. And millions of families are struggling to make ends meet – with food banks unable to meet demand. The forecast easing in the inflation rate cannot come soon enough.

The UK also faces a severe pay crisis. Last year was the worst year for wage growth in nearly half a century. In real terms, average earnings shrunk by nearly £80 a month over the course of 2022, with key workers in the public sector finding themselves £180 a month worse off. But the problems facing working people have been much longer in the making: workers are grappling with the longest pay squeeze in over two centuries, which has seen two decades of lost pay. On average, UK workers have lost £20,000 since 2008 as a result of pay not keeping up with inflation. Under Conservative (or Conservative-led) governments since 2010, UK wage growth has been the worst in the G7.

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Workers are absolutely right to want their wages to keep pace with rising prices. In the private sector, unions have secured some big wins, with workers at food firm Cadburys, telecoms engineers at BT and warehouse staff at retailer B&Q among those securing double-digit pay awards. Workplace by workplace, negotiation by negotiation, unions are striving to secure dignity and decency for their members.

While workers across Europe are struggling with the cost of living, the crisis is particularly acute in the UK. Brexit, attacks on trade union rights and our growing epidemic of low-paid, insecure work have all intensified the pressure on working people. But as workers struggle, city bonuses, corporate profits and shareholder dividends have been rising relentlessly, indicating a dangerously imbalanced economy. With its public services falling apart, Britain risks becoming 'the sick man of Europe' once again.

Failure of the Conservative government

Rather than supporting working people through the crisis, the Conservative government has made matters worse, preferring to escalate disputes rather than resolve them. It has made a political choice to hold down pay for public sector workers it lauded as heroes during the pandemic – and is refusing to negotiate with unions. It has imposed some of the most restrictive anti-trade union laws in the industrialised world. And it is now attacking a fundamental British liberty, the right to strike, in a cynical bid to detract from its own failure to address the cost-of-living crisis.

Rather than undermining organised labour, the UK would do well to emulate Germany. While strikes in the Federal Republic are by no means unheard of, Germany's system of industrial relations – based on co-

determination between unions and employers – delivers better outcomes for workers, employers and society as a whole. And by engaging unions as social partners, the Berlin government ensures the interests of workers shape policy. The trade union federation, the DGB, has been successful in putting trade unions at the heart of Germany's national life.

Trade unions want to build a new economy that rewards work rather than wealth.

That's why the TUC is leading the campaign for economic change in the UK. In the short term, we're demanding a pandemic-style support package for working people. Instead of removing the cap on bankers' bonuses and cutting corporate taxes, we want the government to put money in the pockets of working people with better benefits, more generous pensions and action to get wages rising. Rather than falsely invoking the prospect of a wage-price spiral, ministers should deliver a decent rise for public sector workers and a £15 minimum wage without delay.

In the long run, trade unions want to build a new economy that rewards work rather than wealth. We're calling for a New Deal for workers with better rights, a ban on exploitative practices such as zero-hours contracts and a stronger role for unions. We're campaigning for fair pay agreements for sectors such as social care, using collective bargaining to raise pay, conditions and standards industry by industry. And we're demanding an industrial strategy worthy of the name, to deliver the productivity increases we need to fund higher pay. Not only has Labour pledged to deliver all of this if it wins the next election – but this agenda would also help reduce the number of strikes in the UK.

Amidst so much economic and industrial turmoil, this will be a pivotal year for workers in the UK. With the cost-of-living crisis set to continue for months, unions will keep fighting for a decent pay rise for our members. And if the government persists with its 1980s-style anti-union playbook – giving employers new powers to sack striking workers and sue unions – another round of industrial unrest is sure to follow suit.

Meaningful dialogue with employers remains the most effective way of resolving disputes. In both the public and private sectors, unions want serious negotiations about pay. In what remains the world's sixth-largest economy, UK workers deserve a fair share of the wealth their labour creates. In the long run, that's the best way to reduce the incidence of strikes.



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