

A summer of anger in Britain

The ruling class demands further sacrifices The response of the working class is to fight!

“Enough is enough”. This cry has reverberated from one strike to the next over the last few weeks in the UK. This massive movement, dubbed “The Summer of Discontent”, referring back to the “Winter of Discontent” in 1979, has involved workers in more and more sectors each day: the railways, the London Underground, British Telecom, the Post Office, the dockworkers in Felixstowe (a key port in the south east of Britain), refuse workers and bus drivers across various parts of the country, those at Amazon, etc. Today it’s transport workers, tomorrow it may be the health workers and teachers.

All the reporters and commentators are referring to this as the biggest working class action in Britain for decades; only the huge strikes of 1979 produced a bigger and more widespread movement. Action on this scale in a country as large as Britain is not only significant locally, it is an event of international significance, a message to the exploited of every country.

With attacks on the living standards of all those exploited, the class struggle is only answer

Decade on decade, as in other developed countries, successive British governments have relentlessly attacked living and working conditions with one consequence: to make those conditions more precarious and flexible in order to improve national competitiveness and profit. These attacks have reached such a level in recent years that infant mortality in Britain has had *“an unprecedented increase since 2014”* (according to the medical journal *BJM Open*).

This is why the current surge in inflation is a real tsunami. With a 10.1% year-on-year price increase in July, 13% expected in October, 18% in January, the damage is devastating. The NHS has warned that *“Many people could be forced to choose between skipping meals to be able to heat their homes, or having to live in the cold and damp instead”*. With gas and electricity prices rising by 54% on April 1st and 78% on October 1st, the situation is effectively untenable.

The extent of the mobilisation of the British workers today is finally a match for the attacks they are facing, when in recent decades, suffering from the setbacks of the Thatcher years, they did not have the strength to respond.

In the past, British workers have been among the most militant in the world. The “Winter of Discontent” of 1979, based on the tally of strike days recorded, was the most massive movement in any country after May 1968 in France, even greater than in the “Hot Autumn” of 1969 in Italy. The Thatcher government managed to suppress its enormous combativity in a lasting way by inflicting a series of bitter defeats on the workers, particularly during the miners’ strike in 1985. This defeat marked a turning point with a prolonged decline of workers’ combativity in the

UK; it even heralded the general decline of workers’ combativity across the world. Five years later, in 1990, with the collapse of the USSR, fraudulently described as a “socialist” regime, and the no less false announcement of the “death of communism” and the “definitive triumph of capitalism”, a knock-out punch was landed on workers worldwide. Since then, deprived of a perspective, their confidence and class identity eroded, the workers in Britain, more severely than anywhere else, have suffered from the attacks of successive governments without being able to really fight back.

But, in the face of the bourgeoisie’s attacks, anger has been building up and today, the working class in Britain is showing that it is once again prepared to fight for its dignity, to reject the sacrifices that are constantly demanded by capital. Furthermore, it is indicative of an international dynamic: last winter, strikes started to appear in Spain and the US; this summer, Germany and Belgium also experienced walkouts; and now, commentators are predicting “an explosive social situation” in France and Italy in the coming months. It is not possible to predict where and when the workers’ combativity will re-emerge on a massive scale in the near future, but one thing is certain: the scale of the current workers’ mobilisation in Britain is a significant historical event. The days of passivity and submission are past. The new generations of workers are raising their heads.

The class struggle in the face of imperialist war

The importance of this movement is not just the fact that it is putting an end to a long period of passivity. These struggles are developing at a time when the world is confronted with a large-scale imperialist war, a war which pits Russia against Ukraine on the ground but which has a global impact with, in particular, a mobilisation of NATO member countries. A commitment in weapons but also at the economic, diplomatic and ideological levels. In the Western countries, the governments are calling for sacrifices to “defend freedom and democracy”. In concrete terms, this means that the proletarians of these countries must tighten their belts even more to “show their solidarity with Ukraine” - in fact with the Ukrainian bourgeoisie and the ruling class of the Western countries.

The governments have unashamedly justified their economic attacks by using the catastrophe of global warming and the risks of energy and food shortages (*“the worst food crisis ever”* according to the UN Secretary General). They call for “sobriety” and declare the end of “abundance” (to use the iniquitous words of French President Macron). But at the same time they are strengthening their war economy: global military spending reached \$2,113 trillion in 2021! While the UK is among the top five states in military spending, since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, every country in the world has accelerated its arms race, including Germany, a first since 1945!

Governments are now calling for “sacrifices to fight inflation”. This is a sinister joke when all they are doing is making it worse by escalating their spending on war. This is the future that capitalism and its competing national bourgeoisies are promising: more wars, more exploitation, more destruction, more misery.

Furthermore, this is what the workers’ strikes in Britain point to, even if the workers are not always fully conscious of it: the refusal to sacrifice more and more for the interests of the ruling class, the refusal to sacrifice for the national economy and for the war effort, the refusal to accept the logic of this system which leads humanity towards catastrophe and, ultimately, to its destruction. **The alternatives are clear: socialism or the destruction of humanity.**

The need to avoid the traps of the bourgeoisie

The workers’ ability to take this stand is all the more significant given that the working class in the UK has been bludgeoned in recent years by populist ideology, which sets the exploited against each other, divides them into ‘natives’ and ‘foreigners’, blacks and whites, men and women, to the point of making them believe that the insular retreat into Brexit could be a solution to their problems.

But there are other, far more pernicious and dangerous traps set by the bourgeoisie in the path of the working class struggles.

The vast majority of the current strikes have been called by the trade unions, who present themselves as the most effective body for organising the struggle and defending the exploited. The unions are most effective, yes, but only in defending the bourgeoisie and organising the defeat of the working class.

It’s enough to remember to what extent Thatcher’s victory was made possible thanks to the sabotage of the unions. In March 1984, when 20,000 job cuts were abruptly announced in the coal industry, the miners’ reaction was immediate: on the first day of the strike, 100 pits out of 184 were closed down. But a union corset of steel would quickly encircle strikers. The railway workers’ and seamen’s unions gave token support to the strike. The powerful dockers’ union was reduced to making two late calls for strike action. The TUC (the national congress of trade unions) refused to support the strike. The electricians’ and steelworkers’ unions opposed it. In short, the unions actively sabotaged any possibility of a common struggle. But above all, the miners’ union, the NUM (National Union of Mineworkers), completed this dirty work by restricting the miners to futile pitched battles with police in the attempt to prevent the movement of coal from the coking depots (this lasted for more than a year!). Thanks to this union sabotage, to these sterile and endless confrontations with the police, the repression of the strike was carried out with intense violence. This defeat would be a defeat for the whole working class.

If today, in the UK, these same unions use a radical language and pretend to be advocating solidarity between the various sectors, even brandishing the threat of a general strike, it’s because they are alive to the concerns of the working class and they want to take charge of what drives the workers, their anger, their combativity and their feeling that we have to fight together, so that they are better able to sterilise and divert this dynamic. In reality, on the ground, they are orchestrating the strikes separately; behind the unitary slogan of higher wages for all, the different sectors are locked up in and separated in corporatist negotiations; above all, they take great care to avoid any real discussions between the workers from the different sectors. There are no real cross-industry general assemblies anywhere. So don’t be fooled when Liz Truss, the front-runner to replace Boris Johnson, says she “won’t let Britain be held to ransom by militant trade unionists” if she becomes Prime Minister. She is simply following in the footsteps of her role model, Margaret Thatcher; she is giving credibility to the unions by presenting them

as the most combative representatives of the workers in order to better, together, lead the working class to defeat.

In France, in 2019, faced with the rise of combativity and the outburst of solidarity between the generations, the unions had already used the same stratagem by advocating the “convergence of struggles”, a substitute for a unitary movement, where the demonstrators who marched in the street were grouped by sector and by company.

In the UK, as elsewhere, in order to build a balance of forces that will enable us to resist the relentless attacks on our living and working conditions, which will become even more violent tomorrow, we must, wherever we can, come together to debate and put forward the methods of struggle that have made the working class strong and enabled it, at certain moments in its history, to shake the bourgeoisie and its system, through:

- searching for support and solidarity beyond “our” factory, “our” company, “our” sector of activity, “our” town, “our” region, “our” country;

- the autonomous organisation of the workers’ struggles, in particular through general assemblies, and preventing the control of the struggle by the unions, the “so-called specialists” in the organisation of workers’ struggles;

- developing the widest possible discussion on the general needs of the struggle, on the positive lessons to be drawn from past struggles - including the defeats, because there will be defeats, but the greatest defeat is to suffer attacks without reacting to them; the entry into struggle is the first victory of the exploited.

If the return of widespread strikes in the UK marks the return of the combativity of the world proletariat, it is also vital that the weaknesses which signalled its defeat in 1985 are overcome: corporatism and illusions in the trade unions. **The autonomy of the struggle, its unity and solidarity are the indispensable yardsticks in the preparation for tomorrow’s struggles!**

And for that, we have to recognise ourselves as members of the same class, a class whose struggle is united by solidarity: the working class. Today’s struggles are indispensable not only because the working class is defending itself against the attacks but also because they point the way to the recovery of class identity worldwide, to preparing the overthrow of this capitalist system, which can only bring us impoverishment and catastrophes of all kinds.

There are no solutions within capitalism: neither to the destruction of the planet, nor to wars, nor to unemployment, nor to precariousness, nor to poverty. Only the struggle of the world proletariat supported by all the oppressed and exploited of the world can open the way to the alternative.

The massive strikes in Britain are a call to action for proletarians everywhere

International Communist Current, 27 August 2022

We are distributing this leaflet in all countries where we have militants present. We are also organising public meetings open to all those who want to continue to reflect on what is at stake in this situation and to exchange views. The next meetings will be online at 11am (UK time) on Saturday 10 September, and at 5pm (UK time) on Sunday 11 September. If you want to take part, please write to us at uk@internationalism.org, indicating which day suits you best.

You can find the ICC press and the dates and times of public meetings at our website:

en.internationalism.org

