

Tea Break

Irregular workers bulletin

July 2008

Hundreds of thousands say: "Enough is enough!"



The past few months have seen strikes up and down the country in numbers unheard of in recent years. Many of these are united by one single issue: that pay increases are not keeping up with the rapidly rising cost of living.

The government is attempting to cap public sector pay 'rises' at 2% while inflation stands at a minimum of 4.5%. While for many, this dispute is merely the culmination of ongoing problems faced at work such as excessive workloads and cuts in services, poor pay is proving to be an issue which is uniting workers across the whole public sector.

As Tea Break goes to press, over 640,000 local government workers are due to strike alongside 100,000 civil servants on the 16th-17th July. These walkouts will affect huge swathes of public services from rubbish collection to benefits payments to schools and more.

However, these are just part of what is being touted as 'the summer of discontent' with workers in various sectors and unions joining in a dispute which shows explicitly that our interests lie in supporting each other. By fighting together for a decent pay rise, workers

can strengthen the bonds between us and build a level of organisation which can fight and win over more local issues such as bullying, harassment and cuts.

Consequently, it is vital that the strikes over pay are as well-observed as possible. If the employers see workers will stick together they will be less confident (and less able) to force through further cuts in pay, conditions and services.

UK strike round-up

Public Sector

As well as July, 100,000 civil servants across ten departments in the PCS also struck on 24th April and are now balloting for discontinuous action (action which can be taken without having to re-ballot each time). Meat inspectors are also balloting for strike action and staff at the British and Science museums struck in recent months and are due to begin work-to-rule. Coastguards took their first industrial actions in history, striking first on 11th and 24th April. Firefighters at government owned Scotland Highlands and Islands airport service were on strike on 23rd of June and 3rd July.

Local government

As well as their July strike, council workers also struck across the country on April 24th, with 20,000 across all local government unions striking in Birmingham alone. 100,000 Scottish council workers in Unison are being balloted separately for strike action rejecting a 2.5% per year offer.

Education

Further education lecturers in the UCU struck on April 24th over pay and Welsh further education lecturers are being balloted separately as part of the same dispute, improving the offer from 2.45% to 3.2% (though below inflation, the union recommended accepting). Meanwhile, 250,000 teachers in the NUT struck on April 24th and balloting for discontinuous action, possibly coinciding with more local government strikes in October. 1,000 Ofsted inspectors in Unison and PCS also struck together over pay in May.

Health

Health workers have been offered 8% over three years with Unison and Royal College of Nursing leaders not only accepting the deal but also had a hand in drawing up the sub-inflation offer. GMB and Unite recommended rejection, with members voted 96% and 99.5% to reject the deal respectively. Unite members are now being balloted for strike action though GMB members are not despite their massive rejection vote.

Private sector

Shell drivers won a 9% increase for this year following a four day strike (see back). Shelter workers across the UK struck twice in March and again on April 24th. Local journalists in the NUJ in York also took strike action over a sub-inflation pay offer and Unite members at Argos will strike on the 17th and 24th of July for the same reason. 750 London Underground cleaners, spread over four different contractors held a 1 day strike in June, followed by a 48 hour stoppage in July. The cleaners are demanding an increase to a living wage of £7.20 an hour, with continuing action threatened over the summer.

What you can do...

- Vote for industrial action where possible and encourage others to do the same.
- Visit other workers' picket lines and discuss how you can help each other.
- Make links between workers. Invite all staff at your workplace to your pay dispute meetings whether temps, permanent, members of your union or not.
- Do not cross the picket lines of any group of workers.
- If you absolutely have to work, do not cover the work of any strikers and take on-the-job action like go-slows and work-to-rules. Don't forget to take regular breaks!
- Take control of the strike. Make decisions in open workplace meetings with as many people involved as possible rather than leaving it to union full-timers.

Tanker drivers lead by example

While the government claimed there couldn't be any wavering in the 2% pay ceiling, oil tanker drivers showed that industrial action can significantly improve the offers made to us. Unhappy with their offer, over 500 tanker drivers delivering oil to Shell garages took strike action. With a second strike lined up, their employers caved in, upping their offer to 9% this year alone.

The most important part of the strike, however, was the support they got from drivers in other companies. The Grangemouth depot in Scotland saw protests as drivers from several companies joined the Shell strike after 11 Scottish Fuels drivers were suspended for refusing to cross

picket lines of Shell drivers. Striking truckers in Plymouth were joined by workers from all the hauling firms and more drivers refused to cross pickets in Ellesmere Port, Merseyside.

The support from other drivers not directly involved in the dispute spread the effects of strike and showed both the government and the company that Shell drivers were not isolated. The government was only able to push through its sub-inflation pay offers last year by isolating each group of workers and taking them on one by one. It is the same offer being made across the public sector, to health and council workers, civil servants, teachers and others. As the tanker drivers showed us, it is by supporting each other regardless of who employs us that ensures we can defend our conditions.

What went wrong in 2007?



Gordon Brown preaching pay restraint, union leaders talking about 'co-ordinated strike action', sound familiar? It should, because exactly the same things were being said last year. Despite brave attempts in 2007, workers suffered another defeat, unable to assert our own interests against both our bosses and unions who did deals behind closed doors, ignored strike votes, witch-hunted their members, and dragged on consultations for months.

Just like this year, 2007 started with a 2% cap on public sector pay rises. This led to a wave of strikes which, while impressive, were stopped before many even got started. To reverse this trend, we need to learn from previous mistakes in order not to repeat them again.

Postal staff started well, with rolling strikes and a work to rule followed by wildcat strikes across the country. With

the second wave of official strikes due, the CWU leadership called them off, entering 'meaningful negotiations'. These lasted weeks and came to no firm conclusion apart from leaving strikers in Liverpool who had continued with unofficial action unpaid and out on a limb, as the CWU refused to release details of deals for fear of a massive negative reaction from its members.

There were also strikes by 200,000 civil servants, significant strikes by health and local government workers in Manchester, Glasgow and Birmingham, and in the private sector by thousands of workers at Grampian Foods, Coca Cola and Heinz. So with hundreds of thousands out on strike, how did we not get the victory we needed?

First we need to look at what was promised: 'prolonged and sustained strike action' and coordination between unions. And what we got:

strikes cancelled at the slightest hint of a deal, majority votes rejected as not enough of a mandate, local union members witch-hunted by the national executive after refusing to remain neutral over the dispute.

So how do we respond to this? Certainly not by appealing to the union leadership! While the right wing press complains of Labour's close ties to the unions, they fail to mention the unions' close ties to Labour: it's a short jump from trade union leader to cushy ministerial position or fat pay check sitting in a think tank, and that's where their interests lie (since their wages go up regardless of whether ours do). Trying to replace leaders or 'democratise' the unions is another old game that was bankrupt even when union membership was higher and more militant, it just catapults militants into the same positions and compromises they attacked moments before.

What's needed is independent activity outside these structures and that us at the bottom of the union ladder look after our interests regardless of what's said by those at the top. This means co-operation of workers across boundaries of union, sector and the public/private divide. Even small numbers of workers can have a big effect if they break out of these restrictions. By taking our breaks, leaving on time, organising go-slows, walking out in defence of victimised colleagues, in fact, taking action without waiting for people who've got no interest in our situation, except in us continuing to give them permission to take control of our struggles, we can make this year's strikes more successful than the last.