

<https://majoritypost.com/summer-of-strikes/>



Majority Post

Summer Of Strikes

GARETH DALE

- [July 29, 2022](#)

Britain this summer experienced the biggest rail strike in a generation, and the biggest labour protest in years, when tens of thousands took to the streets in revolt against the cost of living squeeze. Led by the rail workers' brass band, trade unionists thronged the streets of London. There were columns from the teachers', firefighters', shopworkers' and college lecturers' unions, from Unite and Unison, as well as anti-racist groups and even solidarity delegations from France. In scale it was impressive; I took a perverse delight in encountering only few acquaintances, so enveloped by the crowds were we all.

At the rally, rail workers' leader Mick Lynch talked of [class struggle](#). He has become the online sensation of the summer; his effortless swatting of sniping pundits has launched a thousand memes. Even parts of the mainstream media are [lauding](#) him as a [folk hero](#).

The buzz around Lynch is not a function of his natural talent and charisma—though he has these in spades. Rather, here is 'someone like us'—a child of immigrants raised in council-estate poverty—giving voice to the grievances of rail workers and the wider working class, and demanding redress.

If Lynch is the symbol of the newly insurgent mood, he is not alone among union leaders. At the same rally the general secretary of Unite, Sharon Graham, was equally militant. The crisis is not of our making, she [blazed](#). How dare the bosses and politicians call for pay restraint! The profits of Britain's biggest companies have risen 70%; inflation is caused by profiteering, not wages. What's needed is wage hikes and radical redistribution. Given that "the politicians"—including Labour—"are failing us, we must take action ourselves."

Many of the marchers had already taken industrial action this year, or are anticipating a ballot in the coming months. The number of strikes and strike ballots has soared. Many yes votes have been high—and are often sufficient to win demands before action is taken.

In recent months Unite has fought several hundred disputes, covering 52,000 workers, and over 115,000 postal workers, following a 98% 'yes' vote on a 77% turnout, are set to strike. On the Glasgow subway the figure was 99% on an 83% turnout. Ballots have been held among bus workers, firefighters and warehouse workers, among criminal barristers, civil servants and university staff, in gas firms and sweet factories, at the pharmaceutical firm GSK, among aviation workers, and engineers and call centre workers at BT. Refuse workers [in](#)

[Sandwell](#) won a 9% pay rise, while for supermarket truck drivers in Basingstoke it was 12%. Teachers' and nurses' unions are gearing up for ballots in the autumn.

This is a significant wave of collective action, but its nature is defensive. The pay claims being won are quickly swamped by tax hikes and inflation. National Insurance, a tax on earnings, was raised this year, bringing Britain's tax take to its highest level since the 1940s. (And this despite decades of neoliberalism with its 'reduce government' mantra.) Because so much of Britain's energy, [80%](#), comes from oil, gas and coal, inflation is high: 11.8% by the RPI measure. With average pay stalled at 6.2%, real wages are in free fall. In the public sector the picture is especially dire: pay settlements are averaging 1.5% (which means a 10.3% real-terms decline). An even sharper pinch is forecast this autumn when another energy price hike will slash household incomes and force thousands to choose between food and warmth.

In accounting for this wave of militancy, the immediate cause is obvious: the sudden and swingeing attacks on living standards. Also significant is the tight labour market. This is not fully understood but several elements are clear. One is Brexit, which cut off a longstanding source of imported workers. Then, during the Covid crisis, employers laid off workers on a large scale and could not re-hire and re-train quickly enough when demand resumed. Many pandemic-hit employees swapped work for higher education or retirement. But probably the dominant factor is declining health. Well over 100,000 Britons are incapacitated by long Covid. The Johnson government was notoriously poor at managing the pandemic: its let-it-rip approach led to a high number of excess deaths, and it has starved the NHS of funding. The upshot is that, [uniquely](#) among the rich countries, in Britain the number of those who are neither employed nor seeking work has risen steadily since 2019. Most of these people are sick. Over [a third of people of working age](#) are suffering from chronic illness, and a third of a million people are past the one-year mark in their wait for hospital treatment.

Whether in economy, society or politics, the crisis in Britain is deeper than in any other G7 country, with the possible exception of Italy. The root cause is low productivity growth and galloping inequality.

The talk, aired on the [BBC](#) and in the right-wing press, is that we're heading 'back to the 1970s,' and superficially the likenesses leap out: union militancy, stagflation, and a recession that, like 1974-5, will almost certainly follow the energy price hike.

Yet the differences are much more meaningful. In the 1970s, average yearly per capita GDP growth was substantial, at [2.9%](#). Social movement mobilisation, including labour, was everywhere and vigorous, and had brought inequality to a comparatively decent level. The welfare state was expanding and citizens were relatively content: in 1976 the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) reached its [zenith](#).

Over the ten years to 2021, by contrast, per capita annual GDP growth averaged [0.8%](#). Misery and mental illness are all around, thanks to grotesque levels of inequality as workers endure the [longest and harshest](#) squeeze on earnings in modern history. Anti-union laws have shackled industrial struggle; today's wave of militancy, although real, is from a very low base. Environmental despoliation is exponentially worse, and is exacerbating food-price inflation.

What we inherit today is the *outcome* of the 1970s crisis. Back then, Britain's ruling class, initially steered by the Labour government (1974-79) and taken forward aggressively by Thatcher's Tories, ditched the previous statist model and developed a new hegemonic strategy:

neoliberalism. The Tory Party cohered around the new accumulation regime, followed later by Labour. Britain's state and society shifted onto new tracks.

Today, we again see a deep political crisis, but the germ of a new growth model is nowhere in view.

Take the Tories. Their nosediving popularity is not simply due to their being perceived as corrupt and arrogant. It's also that their strategies are floundering. Brexit has been a lame duck, not a golden goose. The 'levelling up' agenda has up-levelled not a single northern town or social group. The party is riven and floundering. Liz Truss is the odds-on favourite to become prime minister, yet her political base is meagre. Fewer than one third of her party's MPs gave her their votes, and when 900 surveyed randomly-selected Tory party members were offered a [four-way choice](#) among prospective leaders, only 13% plumped for Truss. No coherent project will develop under a Truss premiership (though that won't make it any less ghastly).

Whereas in the 1970s the opposition Tories pushed hard for a new economic regime, today's opposition, Labour, is lost in space. Keir Starmer, its leader, appears wooden, perpetually scared of appearing left-wing, and servile to media tycoons and focus groups—a robot poodle. He has centred his campaign strategy on a vacuous platitude in triplicate: [growth, growth, growth](#). The identity he pitches to voters is negative: “I Am Not Jeremy Corbyn!”

The Labour leadership, [quips Corbyn](#), is “offering management, when what people need is inspiration.” In my own borough, Haringey, the local election this May told its own story of the divorce between Labour and inspiration. Participation, when compared with the previous election when Corbyn was Labour leader, declined in all twenty-one wards. In the working-class neighbourhoods the fall was dizzying: by 50% or more.

The first step toward addressing inflation and the climate crisis would be to nationalise the rail network and energy utilities. Such a policy would be inspirational, and a win-win, for it is [consistently](#) popular with voters. Yet Starmer's Labour, in accord with the Tories, has ruled it out. He is united with them, too, in condemning the strikes and union militancy.

We can anticipate, then, new twists to this crisis as it hurtles along the axes of economy, social cohesion, and political representation. The incoming Tory leader will face milquetoast opponents across the House of Commons benches but tough resistance from some unions, possibly also from the [Don't Pay](#) campaign that is mobilising for mass non-payment of energy bills, and even from riots and unrest which are [widely predicted](#).

The government will lash out. It has passed [draconian legislation](#) that empowers the police to forcibly disperse any demonstration they wish. Both Tory leadership contenders, Truss and Sunak, have signalled that their government will outlaw strike action in some industries. In response, Mick Lynch is looking forward to a political general strike. If their proposals become law, he [foresees](#) mass workers' resistance “rivalling the general strike of 1926, the suffragettes and Chartism.” Historical analogies are easy to moot, but that a union leader is making this call feels significant.

GARETH DALE teaches politics at Brunel University. His publications include books on Karl Polanyi, the GDR and Eastern Europe, green growth, revolutions, and migration. His essays have appeared in *The Conversation*, *The Ecologist*, *Open Democracy*, *Jacobin*, *Spectre*, and *Viewpoint*.

© 2022 All Rights are Reserved – Majority Post.