

# STRIKES OFFER HOPE

Against a background of war, deepening climate crisis, crumbling public services, poor quality housing and soaring prices, the increase in strikes to levels not seen since 1989 offers hope. The strikes are driven by inflation, labour shortages, grievances accumulated over decades of union passivity, the inspiration of strikes and unions in the news, and a lack of illusions that waiting for Starmer's Labour Party will solve our problems.

Photo: Steve Eason



It's been great to see Unite more focused on supporting and winning strikes. Most strikes are winning at least something, and a few - particularly in smaller bargaining units affected by labour shortages - are beating inflation. But in too many cases disputes are dragging on with no clear plan to win or are settling for real-terms pay cuts despite public support. We still need a big, visible win.

Despite rapid growth in areas where unions took action, overall union membership fell significantly in 2022 - particularly among women in the private sector. It's been great to see new groups of workers joining the fight, with RCN nurses taking their first strikes in England and Wales and GMB Amazon workers building on last year's wildcat strikes. But most workers aren't organised and aren't striking.

## Organise, escalate, coordinate!

We need to spread union organisation and action across more of the working class. Even in unionised workplaces, organisation is often in a shocking state. We can't recover from decades of passivity and partnership overnight. Unfortunately, unions are already over-stretched supporting existing members going into struggle. So no army of paid organisers is going to rebuild working-class organisation. We have to do it ourselves with whatever help we can get.

Some big victories would be even more inspiring than the strikes. In many of the larger strikes the level of action called has simply not been enough to win. One factor is leaders' fear that workers are unwilling to take sustained action where strikes are too big to enable much strike pay. We risk a Catch-22 where workers can't afford to take enough action to win, but see little point in action too timid to win. Escalation often gets better results at less cost than long low-intensity disputes. We need solidarity to enable escalation. Solidarity isn't charity - giving solidarity makes us stronger. For more on how strikers and supporters can help, see [www.rs21.org.uk/solidarity](http://www.rs21.org.uk/solidarity)

Coordinating strikes is always worthwhile, but it is vital in disputes where the government is blocking settlement. Joint action is much more likely to defeat the government than piecemeal opposition. When we do strike together, joint rallies, marches and other actions increase the benefits.

# MANIFESTO PLUS

Sharon Graham's election as General Secretary sent shockwaves through our union. It reflected a frustration amongst many members that we have been nowhere near effective enough at winning. Many workers have suffered years of wages falling behind inflation while our public services crumble, the welfare state becomes increasingly punitive and decent housing becomes a luxury.

Most Unite members are employed by organisations which span multiple regions. It is common to have union recognition in some workplaces but little or no organisation in the same employer in a different region. With most resources held by regions, we have struggled to coordinate campaigns nationally. Our structures are ideal for fighting the local employers of the nineteenth century, not the enemies we face today.

This is why Sharon's flagship policy of promoting combines is key. Bringing together reps from across an employer or industry and providing resources to the combine helps workers win.

It is a tragedy that the 'United Left' faction, which has the support of many officers and Executive Council members, has been opposing combines. There is a good reason and a bad reason for this opposition.

The good reason is a concern that the combines exist in parallel to the democratic structures of the union, which we undermine at our peril. The combines must operate democratically and be able to operate even when they take positions which challenge to the leadership.

Instead of opposing combines, we need to push for more democratisation of Unite. The truth is that our structures aren't working well. Many elections are uncontested. There are so many levels of committees that it is hard for workers without plenty of facility time to get very involved.

**LET'S GET  
BACK TO THE  
WORKPLACE**



Many of us fill so many positions we can't devote enough energy to any of them. Democracy can't function properly without participation - the low turnouts in General Secretary and Executive Council elections should be a warning to us all. The activist base isn't being renewed fast enough.

We have an opportunity to renew our democracy - using combines and the strike wave to draw in more, new, younger activists.

Instead of opposing combines, we should be combining them with a democratisation of our structures to make officers more accountable to members and increase participation.

The bad reason is that United Left supporters occupy many of the positions in our committee structures and some seem more interested in holding on to them than the renewal of our union.

No General Secretary gets everything right - instead of opposing combines let's back them and go further - using them to help renew and democratise our union.



# NATIONALISM



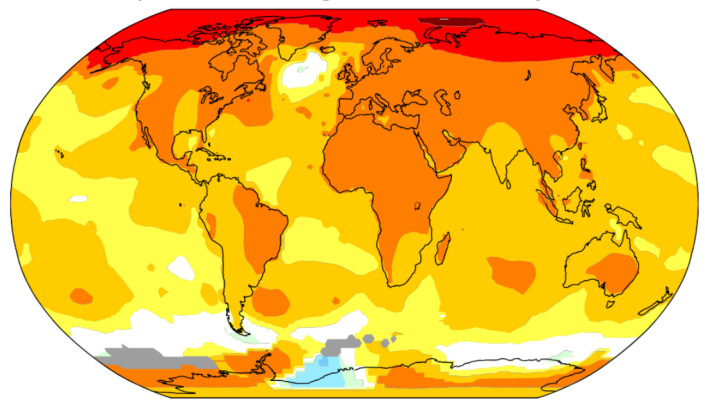
Almost everyone thinks nationalism is damaging when it's in someone else's country. But it's not always as easy to spot or challenge at home.

Thankfully we no longer have a General Secretary who poses with Daily Star models and 'British Jobs for British Workers' posters.

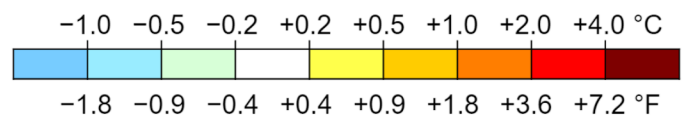
Sadly, Derek Simpson's ignominious departure doesn't mean the argument is history. More than one recent Unite statement has talked about 'British workers'. No doubt the meaning was intended to be 'workers in Britain' rather than 'workers born in Britain' or 'workers with UK citizenship', but this isn't how it would read to a racist - or to migrant workers who are Unite members. We can't fudge on these ideas.

We get in to this mess because we have various 'buy British' procurement policies. These are reactions to the problems workers face as neoliberal globalisation. But they see the answer as protectionism rather than working-class unity. This is a dead end. The logic of this would mean opposing trade and British exports - unless we are actually saying 'look after workers in Britain at the expense of workers elsewhere'. When many members work for multinational companies, such an approach would be a disaster. We need working-class unity, not divisions based on nationality.

Temperature change in the last 50 years



2011–2021 average vs 1956–1976 baseline



# CLIMATE

We've just had the hottest June ever. Fires, floods and storms sweep the world, while water and food supplies are threatened. The rich are building bunkers to protect themselves from the effects of climate change, while - as usual - it is the poor who suffer the worst effects.

Business is responding to climate change with greenwashing and techno-fixes - trying to justify a continuation of business as usual with minimal change or techno-fixes that won't deliver decarbonisation in the timescale needed to protect us. Unfortunately, too much of the trade union movement echoes employers' business plans rather than fighting for our needs.

Effective action on climate change is a real threat to wealth and power - we need radical reductions in the polluting consumption of the rich, massive improvements to housing stock and public transport, and a transformation of energy production.

We have to fight for a rapid just transition to a decarbonised economy. That means fighting for both parts - 'rapid' and 'just'. It won't do to counterpose the two, obstructing transition while waiting for employers to deliver 'just' - they won't. Our current position risks echoing Saint Augustine: Lord give me celibacy, but not yet.

# TORY DIVISION TORY REPRESSION

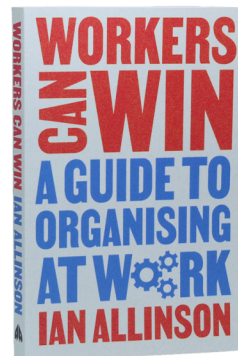
The Tories have no answers to our problems. Indeed they so divided and chaotic they don't even have answers for their own. Instead, they are falling back on two traditional responses to resistance - division and repression.

The Tories are using 'culture-wars' to try to divide us. The treatment of migrants and trans people is appalling and the whole movement needs to stand in solidarity with them and others who are targeted, including those on benefits and racialised people including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.

Anti-union legislation already makes effective strike action unlawful for some workers, such as in construction where subcontracting, bogus self-employment and high labour turnover make balloting almost impossible. The Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill threatens to make more workers to choose between their strikes being effective or lawful. It's great to hear some union leaders talking of defiance. But when they comply with the existing legislation and anti-union laws work by threatening the funds that pay their wages, we can't rely on General Secretaries to lead defiance. Until more workers strike outside these unjust laws, leaders won't be confident that they will get the support to make defiance succeed.

Rank-and-file workers need to organise independently of paid officials so that we can take the action we need to, with or without their backing, so that we can put pressure on them, and so that we can coordinate action even when they fear this might reduce their control over disputes.

The anti-union legislation doesn't stand alone - it comes alongside yet more restrictions on protest, particularly targeting environmentalists and anti-racists but affecting everyone. We need solidarity against state repression - from day-to-day police violence to restrictions on our right to strike.



Discount copies of *Workers Can Win! A Guide to Organising At Work* are available via our website.

 PLUTO PRESS



**SAT 29 JULY  
MANCHESTER**

rs21 is one of many organisations backing the Troublemakers At Work conference which will bring together workers who have won improvements at work, taken strike action, and transformed weak unions into a strong voice for workers - and those who want to.

We can inspire and learn from each other and build lasting rank-and-file networks to help us win.

More info and tickets via [troublemakersat.work](https://troublemakersat.work)

## How to get involved with rs21:

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- Follow us on social media - links and addresses are below.
- Subscribe to our newsletter at [rs21.org.uk/subscribe](https://rs21.org.uk/subscribe)
- Our meetings are free and open to all. [rs21.org.uk/events](https://rs21.org.uk/events)

