

Strikes – why are they so important?

When people go to work they come face to face, directly, with the exploitative nature of our current society – capitalism. It's where workers are confronted with the fact that they only receive back a portion of the value of their work in the form of wages, with the rest forming surplus or profit. It's where they confront the relentless pressure to extract more work and more value for less wages. And it's also where they experience their collective power through combining with others to form unions. Strikes are a vital part of the expression of collective power in the workplace.

The nature of the strike

A strike is a temporary stoppage of work to enforce a demand or protect a right. Strikes are usually portrayed by those involved and outside commenters as part of a range of actions under the umbrella of industrial conflict. This in itself captures part of the reality, namely that there is (usually) organized conflict between workers represented (normally) by their unions and the managers of the organization representing the interests of the employers. Most strikes take place, however, within the context of formal negotiations as part of a wider set of collective bargaining relationships. This side of disputes implies that they are short-term tactics to mobilise worker power to achieve a short-term objective.

The forms and immediate aims of strike action:

Strikes come in many shapes and sizes. They can be official or unofficial depending on support from Union executives. They can be constitutional or unconstitutional depending on the nature of the relevant disputes procedures. They can be lawful or not depending on the ballot, and the cause (it has to be a genuine trade dispute with your own employer). They can be of various durations and involve a range of workers. Some last for a few hours while others go on for weeks, months, and even years. Some involve huge numbers (thousands) while others can be very localised with a handful of workers on strike.

The main causes include pay related, conditions of service (hours, holidays, pensions), redundancies, victimisation, discrimination, health and safety bullying, and union recognition. These vary over time and by industrial sector with pay demands more

common in times of higher inflation, and working hours more likely in private sector services.

The conduct of disputes also varies according to circumstance. Some involve picketing, demonstrations, mass meetings, and even sit-ins. They can be continuous or intermittent, all out or limited action with emergency cover, noisy, violent, or just quietly peaceful. In most cases the purpose is to 'win' as quickly as possible by forcing the employer back to the negotiating table to make more concessions. All of these tactical considerations will be based on the nature of the occupation and sector, the views of the strikers, the line taken by the employer, and possibly in the public sector by citizen reactions.

The consequences for the employers include loss of business, loss of reputation, worsening relations with their own workforce, and increased costs. For the strikers there can be loss of wages, loss of jobs, loss of job security, and victimisation on return to work. In all of this, therefore, there are pressures to settle disputes through bargaining systems within the industry and/or company, or recourse to ACAS for external conciliation, mediation, and arbitration.

Strikes and collective bargaining:

Historically, strikes predate collective bargaining but they were a vital part in its development. It was the uncertain outcomes of early strikes and the vicious retribution of employers backed by the local state and forces of law and order that created the imperative to form permanent organisations such as trade unions, and later to develop conflict avoidance mechanisms such as collective bargaining to both minimise fallout from disputes and legitimise and eventually to legalise such activity. But with legitimacy and legal support comes ambiguity of purpose and process. The dangers of those involved with the system becoming part of the system increases and the defence of collective bargaining can develop into an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. On the other hand, strikes, combined with collective bargaining wins can build the power of unions in the workplace and build their potential to take actions that pose more profound threats to employer power.

Strikes are a reflection of class struggle:

Striking is the most fundamental way in which workers can show their strength and temporary power over the employer in a world where inequality of power dominates the labour market and employment relationship. Through the temporary withholding of labour strikes challenge the entire decision-making system that determines the distribution of wages and profits in society.

For Marxists this means that strikes are a sharp expression of the struggle between the two main classes in society: those who own the means of production and those who work. As workers are pitted against employers, strikes are an objective manifestation of class struggle. However, they are not always experienced as class struggles and they don't always play the same role in building a wider struggle to win improvements for working people. Like collective bargaining processes, strikes tend to be shaped by narrower sectional interests and immediate issues. But because they pose such a direct challenge to the power of employers, their nature as expressions of class struggle in the workplace is never lost.

The purpose of class struggle is to replace capitalism with Socialism through whatever

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means is available and possible. Socialism is about the right of every new born baby to a fair share of the world's resources. In other words it is about a society in which political freedom is linked with economic justice and social equality. Strikes, whatever the avowed intentions and/or political disposition of the strikers and their leaders, reflect all of these concerns. This is why the ruling class in society is always looking for opportunities to limit and if possible, destroy both the legitimacy of strike action and the capacity of workers to use it.

How strikes can form part of a wider class struggle:

While they reflect and express class struggle in the workplace, under certain conditions, strikes can form part of a wider challenge to the class structure of society. The experience of participating in successful strikes can transform people's understanding of their employers, and of the place of the law, the government and the state in society. This is particularly the case when the state mobilises against strikes. The 1984-5 Miners' strike transformed the consciousness of those involved and laid bare for them the class nature of society. In the case of 'mass strikes' whether in the form of set-piece 'general' strikes or of waves of strike action taking place over a period of time, it is possible for industrial action to become part of a wider process of class struggle in society.

But union militancy also means using strikes carefully and consciously as part of a wider strategy founded on building working class fighting confidence and workplace power and seeing strikes as part of a wider political challenge. Strikes are not an end in themselves unless your only model for winning change is a general strike leading to an insurrection.

Strikes in Britain today:

Today the right to strike in Britain is under renewed attack. Since the late 1980s in the UK the number of strikes, strike days lost, workers on strike, have fallen. In the last few years, despite some action over public sector pensions, there have been very few strikes outside the transport sector. This reflects several important developments: low inflation means that pay strikes are less likely; trade unions and associated collective bargaining have fallen in numbers; the legal requirements to strike are much tighter; and the current mood amongst many workers is that striking is not a priority as job security takes over from wages as the major concern.

Union members and leaders need to look at all methods for putting pressure on employers to meet their demands, including overtime bans, withdrawal of goodwill, boycotts of certain types of work, and working to contract or rule. But the strike must remain part of unions' armoury and winning political freedom to use this weapon must remain a priority. In this phase of the class struggle the working-class movement has to focus on its strengths and develop themes to create a more unified class response, and continue the struggle on the widest and most effective possible basis in whatever form.

