Cymru/Wales – “Strike: Our collective future depends on this movement”

Robat Idris writes on the Undod website about the importance of the current strike movement for Welsh/Cymraeg struggles and relates it to the history of the nation’s struggle.

Strike: Our collective future depends on this movement

Introduction

> *“Public sector workers are not on strike because they want to break the system. They’re on strike because the system is broken.” – Mick Lynch, RMT leader, Aberdare, 21-01-2023*

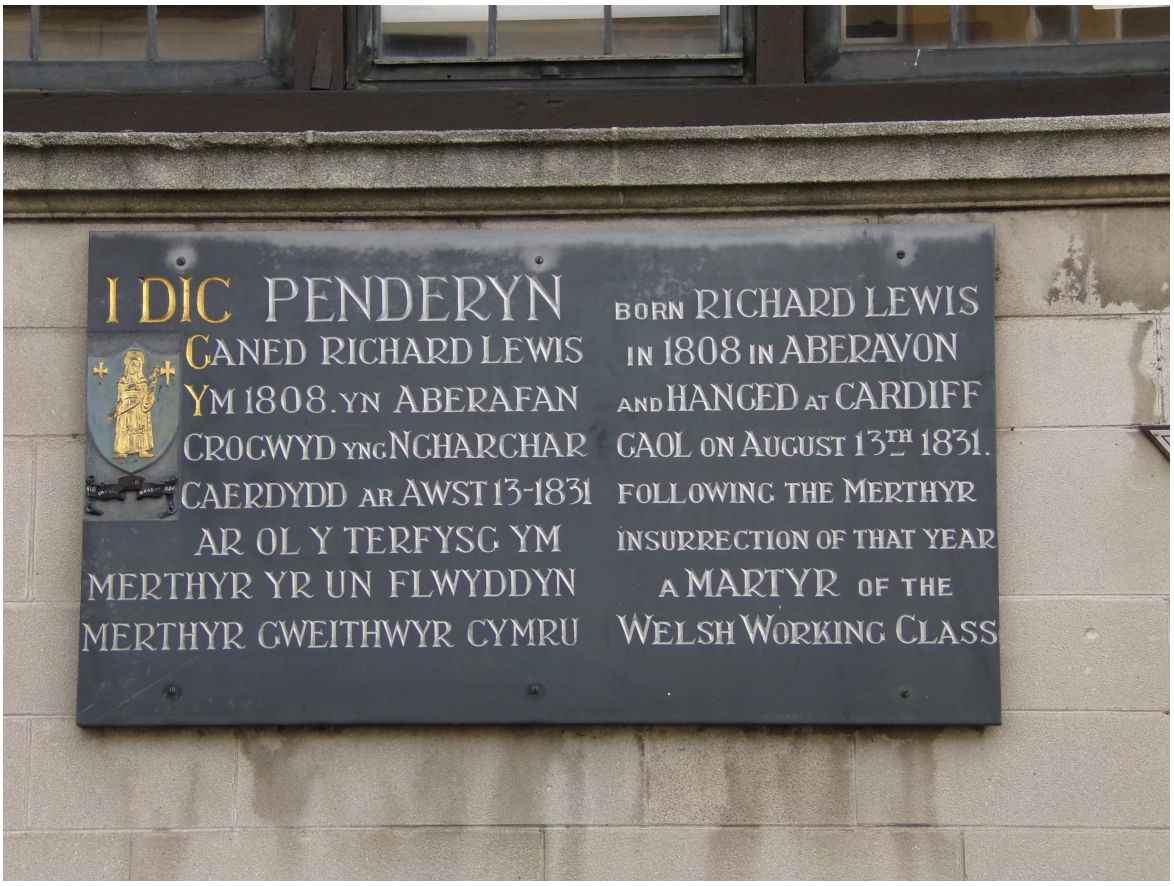
Sometimes, saying nothing and doing nothing tells a lot about who you are. It shows which side you’re on. It shows if you understand what a crisis is or whether you don’t. We live in such a time at the moment. That is why we must support those workers who are on strike. Because in the end, our collective future depends on what the outcome of this fateful battle will be. Do we want our people to live without the threats of poverty, cold, hunger and unemployment or undignified work being hanging over them constantly? Do we want to continue to suffer under the tyranny of capitalism owned by the few? Do we want to surrender our basic rights to strike and protest?

The current strikes are much more significant than just seeking more pay for specific workers. They are all fighting to benefit the wider society, and protect the services the public treasure. They are a cry that echoes from the hospitals

and the schools and the railways and the mail vans and the colleges that proclaim quite clearly: “Enough is enough”. The strikers know very well that one in three children live in poverty in Wales, that the use of food banks is on the rise, and that fuel poverty is rampant. All this following over a decade of austerity, with more to come. The strikers know that wages do not keep up with inflation, especially in the public sector – this was not the case when such inflation was seen in the 80s of the 20th century.

Do we want to lose even the partial freedom we have? Such are the implications of Tory anti-strike legislation. Or do we want to act according to the heroic traditions of workers of the past?

Historical background



Dic Penderyn plaque, Merthyr Tudful

Cymru saw the Red Flag raised for the first time in Merthyr in 1831, followed by the unjust execution of Dic Penderyn – and

up to 24 people were killed during the fighting as well. “Cheese and bread” and “Down with the King” were some of the slogans of the rebellion.

In 1839 Cymru saw the Chartists fighting for rights, when around 20 people were killed by the authorities in Newport.

Cymru saw the longest strike ever, and one of the bitterest, when Bethesda quarrymen rose up against the brutal working conditions of the owner Lord Penrhyn, whose estate had profited enormously from slavery in Jamaica. The strikers would display posters in the windows of their houses with the words *“Nid oes bradwr yn y tŷ hwn”* (“There is no traitor in this house”). The strike lasted from 1900 until 1903, and many had to move to the Valleys to work in the coal industry.

The coalfield, of course, has been the cradle of the workers’ strength, and where there was a continuous dispute between the coal masters and the peasants who lost their health and sometimes their lives in the mines. In 1910 Churchill sent the army to Tonypandy to quell the efforts of the miners to stand against the masters. Churchill’s name is still hated in the area. Closer to our time, came the great miners’ strike in 1984, which gave Thatcher the opportunity to defeat her main enemies – namely the miners – and change the political course of the United Kingdom in the direction of individualism, privatisation, and a squeeze on rights. A post-industrial desert was created in the South Valleys. Thatcher’s heirs are the current Westminster government, and what we see these days is a continuation of her ideological war.



Tonypandy

Today’s strikers

Who are in an industrial dispute today? Ambulance Workers, Nurses, Midwives, Physiotherapists, Royal Mail, Teachers, Railways, Civil Servants, Academics, Buses. It is possible that others such as fire workers and junior doctors will also strike.

Striking is not something to undertake thoughtlessly. People have reached the end of their tether. Perhaps it is the wages that have not risen much for ten years, and therefore more and more people who work full time have fallen into the pit of poverty as inflation is rampant, which on the surface has triggered them to strike. But there is much more to it than this. Time and time again over the last few years, we heard about unbearable working conditions with targets being elevated above service. In different occupations, workers have suffered from mental and physical illness, until people are completely exhausted and have to leave their work. This is true for many occupations other than those who are on strike.

The fight against the employers is not just about protecting wages. All of these strikes are battling against fundamental

changes to workers' rights, such as holidays and sick leave, and the much devalued terms offered to new staff.

At the same time we see that corporate profits and payments to corporate chiefs and directors of companies rise and rise to incredible levels.

National Health Service

Hooray! These workers were heroes during Covid! Deserving of being clapped in the street! But clapping doesn't buy a loaf or keep the house warm. It does not hide the mismanagement of the NHS which is tottering on the brink of failure. And it certainly hasn't done anything at all to convince us that the Government's aim in Westminster is not to privatise the NHS.

So the Government is trying to blame the failures of the NHS on the heroic and dedicated workers who are doing their best to look after us. The Government wants to pass anti-strike legislation in order to maintain a "minimum level of service". Of course they don't reach the lowest level of service when there is no strike – the service was on its knees a long time ago. So the the nurses and the ambulance workers are scapegoats.The Government's tough new law could mean that nurses are sacked. We cannot accept that – especially bearing in mind the scandals about friends of the Government getting contracts worth millions at the time of Covid, and providing equipment of an unacceptable standard, and without anyone being called to account.Do we want the Health Service to be privatised?In the context of Cymru, our Government says that it is grateful to the Health Service workers, but that it cannot pay the workers more without more financial support from the Westminster government. You decide if that is a sufficient reason. Incidentally, this is at the core of the contradiction which characterises Welsh Labour – on the one hand, it believes in the Union with England; but on the other hand it complains when there is not enough money or sufficient attention being given to Cymru. And undeniably, the Health

Service is Labour’s main article of faith, yet it cannot protect it effectively.

Royal Mail

The service is 500 years old. Since its privatisation years ago, it has been under siege. “Competition” is one of the holy words of capitalism – and so the competition of the free market means that a multitude of companies deliver parcels to us. It appears that the van drivers of these companies suffer from poor working conditions, with targets that are almost impossible to achieve. No doubt this enables a cheaper service, but at what cost? Not only in human terms (attacking the working conditions and wages of Royal Mail workers, and taking advantage of workers from the other companies), but also the environmental cost – where one vehicle used to bring goods to us, now there can be several in day.

Teachers and Assistants

These are workers who had a very difficult time during Cofid, carrying responsibilities that were almost impossible at times. Combine this with an increase in their workload, lack of support and resources, discipline problems, an oppressive system of inspection, the fear of losing your job when a complaint is made about you, and it’s no wonder things have come to an end. We know that many leave the profession for these reasons.Do we really want a society where our children are taught by teachers who have fought, are looking forward to retirement or aspire to leave teaching for a different career?

Railways

Mick Lynch, the leader of the RMT, has become prominent in this troubled time. He led his union, and to all intents and purposes the labour movement in the absence of leadership from Starmer, the leader of the post-socialist Labour Party (although there are many good socialists amongst its ranks)

who condemned one of his own shadow cabinet for daring to go on a picket line . Mick Lynch is certainly particularly effective in standing up for his own employees, and also in explaining the wider picture. Don't be surprised if we see relentless attacks on him by the Government and the media. It is worth reading an article about his visit to Aberdare in Voice Wales, and watching a video of his speech there.The Government has clearly shown which side they are on, by ensuring that the companies that run the railways have not lost a single penny since the dispute began – and it has cost the country more than if the dispute would had been settled. This is an ideological battle.As in the case of other workers, the protection of service users and their safety is one of the main reasons for striking.Do we want an inferior rail service with the increased risk of accidents?

Academics

The world of colleges changed beyond all comprehension in a generation. Where there used to be students, today there are "customers" who want "value for money" for their fees. Learning institutions were turned into profit making factories by expanding the numbers of students beyond the ability of the job market to employ them in their respective fields. Lecturers and researchers were changed into machines to try to please administrators, and work contracts were downgraded to being insecure and short-term, as well as changing pensions for the worse. We have even heard of some lecturers sleeping on library floors.Do we want to continue to disrespect learning?

Oppression by Westminster

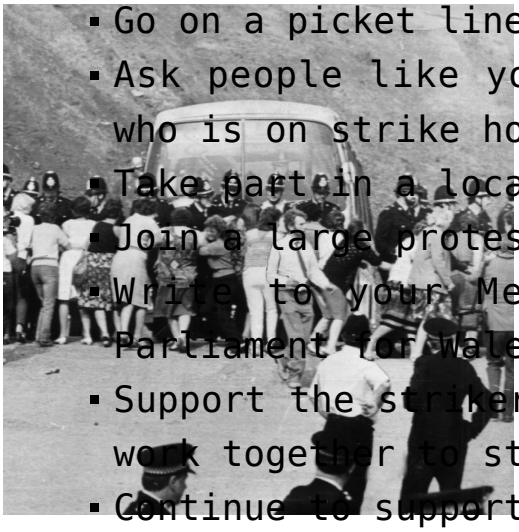
Squeezing the right to strike and intimidating the workers is the purpose of the Act which is currently going through the parliamentary process. The official name is the "Minimum Service Level Bill", but unofficially it is known as the

“Anti-Strike Bill”. According to the Government, they want to ensure a basic level of service in the public sector, by forcing people to work even if the union has won a vote to strike. If people strike in violation of the law, then they can face losing their job.This is a completely unreasonable threat, and shows a complete lack of understanding of things as they are. Because this is the truth – there is no basic level of service in the Health Service when there is no strike of this kind in the world. The troubles of the ambulance service, shortage of nursing staff and doctors, waiting lists, and lack of care in society all testify that the Government is guilty. And in Wales, our Government is dependent on Westminster for resources.This is a cynical attempt to portray the true heroes and essential workers of our society as selfish and unscrupulous people. The truth is that because the Health Service is on its knees the strikers are acting to protect it, as well as for their own benefit.We can say exactly the same thing about the other public sector workers on strike.This law will be a blunt instrument in the hands of the rich. The intention is to keep the worker in his place, that is, to be obedient, quiet, and not complaining. The publicity machine will try to divide the strikers, try to turn the public against the strikers, and pave the way for even more privatization and relaxing of safety rules as well as returning the worker to insecurity, poverty and illness .Couple this act with the “Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act” or the Policing Act as it is called, and there is a real attempt to attack our most basic democratic rights. It is not impossible to imagine circumstances where both laws would be implemented at the same time.Is a General Strike the only way to get this obdurate Government to listen?

Support

We can show our support in many ways.

- Join a Union in your workplace.



- Go on a picket line.
- Ask people like your postman or nurse, or anyone else who is on strike how you can help.
- Take part in a local protest.
- Join a large protest if one is organised.
- Write to your Member of Parliament and Member of Parliament for Wales (maybe that's asking too much!).
- Support the strikers on February 1st when several unions work together to strike on the same day.
- Continue to support throughout the strike period.

The Miners' Strike
1984-85

Conclusion

Fundamental questions about the nature of work, sharing the reward for our labour, and the relationship between employer and employee are driving these strikes. Grimly ruthless capitalism is steamrollers it all, and an ideological agenda that is driven by a Government in the hands of a small group of right-wing extremists.

So the question must be asked – is a General Strike the way to force the Westminster Government to listen? The feasibility of such mass action will depend on the ability and willingness of all unions to work together. It would certainly be a big step to take. But what is the alternative? Watching the employers and the government divide the labour movement. The strikers surrendering

little by little, union by union, so that individual disputes are separated from the others, weakening the strength of the whole enterprise? If that happens, it’s not just the strikers who will lose out, but every section of society apart from the rich.

There are so many lessons to be learned by comparing the situation here now with the history of the growth of fascism in the past, that it is truly a scary time. That is why we cannot be silent, and not say or do anything.

The country is tired. The people are exhausted. Poverty and austerity are rampant. Let us begin, here and now, to restore dignity, to raise spirits, to fight for justice and to defeat the forces of greed and oppression.

If a General Strike is called then I would like to think that Undod members will support in whatever way is practical for each individual. Members of an organisation campaigning for a radical future for our country cannot avoid taking sides. This crisis is so serious that we cannot expect to win without fighting to the extreme. Justice is on the side of the workers!

“Trech Gwlad nac Arglwydd!”

(rough translation: “The people overcome the state!”).

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