

Letter from Scotland

They called it “Walkout Wednesday” and it is the nearest Britain, and Scotland, has been to a general strike for 40 years.

An estimated half a million workers went out on strike, 50,000 of them in Scotland. There were teachers, civil servants, railway workers, university lecturers, out on windy picket lines with their placards, colourful flags and woolly hats. There were large rallies in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee where trade union leaders voiced their demands for pay rises that match the 10 per cent rise in the cost of living.



Are we heading for a General Strike ? Public sector workers rally in Edinburgh.

But this is a quiet test of will compared with the General Strike of 1926 or the Winter of Discontent in 1979. Walking around the streets, you would hardly know it was happening – unless you happened to pass one of those rallies at lunchtime, or there was a particularly persistent group of woolly hats at college gates. There were no running battles with the police, or angry matches or even long marches.

But behind the polite protests, there is a widespread feeling that things are not fair. Not many people disagree with the strikers' case. Britain, as a whole, may well have to take a five per cent cut in its living standards because of Brexit, high gas prices and the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, but, to the workers, it seems they are being forced to carry the burden alone and the wealthy are getting off lightly.

A flurry of surveys has confirmed that the wealth gap between upper class families and middle class families is the widest it's ever been. The Resolution Foundation estimates it at £1.2 million per adult, larger than any other OECD country except the USA. The Equality Trust reckons there are now 177 billionaires in Britain. Tax Justice says a few well-placed wealth taxes could raise a massive £37 billion a year to fund public services.

But it appears that Rishi Sunak's government at Westminster is determined to face down the strikers and not offer anything above five per cent. They have said to do otherwise would fan the flames of inflation and lead to more government borrowing. What they never admit is that they could find the money by taxing the rich, which would neither lead to inflation nor increased borrowing.



Workers parading in the General Strike 1926.

History has told us that the strikers will probably lose, as they did in 1926 and 1979. The General Strike collapsed after nine days. And after the Winter of Discontent, Labour lost power for 13 years. But it may be different this time, perhaps the pandemic has changed the rules of history. What is pretty certain to happen is that the Conservatives will lose the next election and then we must wait and see if the Labour Party has the courage to redistribute wealth and not rely on the phantom of “growth” to reach a fairer world.

Here in Scotland, the SNP/Green government has just pushed its budget through parliament. The finance secretary John Swinney told MSPs it “delivers the priorities of a progressive government.” But, as he never tires of explaining, the overall figure of £59 billion is largely determined by Westminster. His hands are tied because he lacks borrowing and other powers. So he can't pay teachers the 10 per cent rise they are asking for, or the nurses the 17 percent they undoubtedly deserve.

Regrettably, he's also had to limit the rise he can give to the 32 local district councils to 1.6 per cent. That means they will have to cut services and, it's rumoured, 7,000 jobs.

What Mr Swinney and the councils could do, however, is to go for that package of wealth taxes mentioned above. It's true the Scottish income tax rate has been raised by a penny in the pound for top earners and it's true that councils have been putting up council tax by 3 per cent, but that's just not enough to save the public services from collapse.

Downtrodden by all our money problems, we are in desperate need of a little winter cheer. In Shetland, they have found it in their Viking festival of "Up Helly Aa" On Tuesday, the Jarl squads paraded through the streets with their flaming torches and set fire to the longboat which, long ago, carried them from Scandinavia to the new world of Scotland. This year, for the first time, women and girls were allowed to join the junior squads and they will soon take their place among the beards in the front line.

In Glasgow, the Celtic Connections folk festival is coming to rousing finale, with 22 events on Saturday and another 8 on Sunday. And this is after a fortnight of 150 shows at 30 trendy venues.

The rest of us will be seeking happiness at Twickenham on Saturday, watching Scotland playing England in the "Six Nations" (to explain, as we must these days, we're talking about the men's event in rugby union.) How fortunate and civilised it is to see neighbouring nations battling it out in mud, wind and rain, and then shake hands and have dinner together afterwards.