

Mick Whitley MP

Building a Better Birkenhead



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www.mickwhitley.co.uk

0151 650 5494

mick.whitley.mp@parliament.uk

Introduction

Normally, at this time of year, I would be wishing you all a Happy New Year. But with this train wreck of a government still in power I am afraid there is not a great deal to be happy about. Energy costs continue to soar, the cost-of-living crisis continues to slash at the living standards of working people, the NHS is being run into the ground and austerity mark two is being ushered in. And to ensure we cannot fight back they are introducing new anti-strike laws. Still, I also welcome the fact that 2023 has started just as 2022 ended – with workers fight back with strikes, pickets and campaigns against this government and against employers who refuse to negotiate. That fighting spirit means there are also good reasons to welcome in 2023. With that thought in mind – Happy New Year comrades.

Defend the Right to Strike



Prime Minister Sunak is waging a war on workers and their unions. And the Tories are using increasingly authoritarian methods in this war. Not content with having the most restrictive anti-union laws in Western Europe, Sunak and

Shapps are pushing through the Minimum Service levels Bill.

This Bill is designed to make strikes in key areas of the public sector ineffective. It gives a Tory Minister the right to decide what a minimum service level is, enforce it with discussion with the trade unions in dispute and, astonishingly, removes any protection from any worker the Minister deems to be in breach of the legislation from unfair dismissal.

It is a Bill that aims to break strikes, victimise workers on strike and sack strikers. It is one of the most vicious anti-union laws. Workers already have to jump through burning hoops to win votes in favour of strike action above government-imposed threshold limits. Now, even if they win those votes by big enough majorities they can be blocked from striking by a government minister.

The new rules will be pushed through in the NHS, the fire service, border force, schools, and the rail and nuclear sectors. What a surprise that it happens to be directed against the workers currently in dispute with the government! As a GMB representative put it, when Shapps had the bare faced cheek to attack the hard pressed ambulance staff driven to strike by this government's callous refusal to negotiate with them:

"He surely knows that across NHS trusts, GMB members who care for the public every single day, work closely with employers to provide appropriate cover on strike days and have left picket lines to help out on urgent calls.

The public know who is to blame for the crisis in our NHS - this government. And, people will be disgusted that in a matter of months, they have gone from clapping health workers to legislating to sack them."

My position is simple, the right to strike is fundamental to any democracy. It was through strike action by unions that some of the most significant steps forward for working people were won – from the eight-hour working day to equal pay legislation.

And these proposals lend credence to the RMT's accusation that Transport Ministers were interfering in negotiations to prevent a resolution to the ongoing rail strikes. They want to try and recapture some of their collapsing support by keeping strikes going and demonising strikers. An old trick but with a new legal twist.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch claimed that an "unprecedented level of ministerial interference . . . is hamstringing rail employers from being able to negotiate a package of measures with us, so we can settle this dispute".



It is clear to me that rather than working to achieve the resolution that rail workers and commuters, hospital patients and those who need ambulances, school students and their

parents need and deserve in this current round of strikes, the Government is intent on escalating the disputes to provide a pretext for driving through this draconian legislation.

But thankfully this ploy is not washing with either the unions or the general public, as support for the current strikes has been evident in opinion poll after opinion poll. And the reason is clear to see.

Wages in every region of Britain are lower today than they were when the Tories came to power in 2010. Public services are broken – not by the strikes but by cuts and neglect. Workers are being driven to strike in ever increasing numbers not because they are mindless militants as Shapps would have you believe but because they care about the schools, hospitals, ambulance services and transport networks that are crumbling around us. They care about the people who use these services. They care enough to lose pay by striking to try and save these services. And the government answer is to pass a law that could see nurses who refuse to obey Shapps the sack.

The Labour Party is opposing these plans, with Keir Starmer committing to repeal any new anti-strike law should Labour win the next General Election. Angela Rayner has been leading the charge against the Bill – with my active and vocal support – in Parliament.

But if I am being completely honest the fact is the Tories have the majority to win in Parliament. If we are going to defeat the Bill now it will be outside the Palace of Westminster. The message from the Trade Union Congress was, “if ministers want to use workers as a political football, the whole trade union movement will be united in defending the right to strike. And make no mistake: we will fight hard.”

That must mean Trade Unions co-ordinating their efforts. And just as they did in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they should strike together to “Kill the Bill”.

Left Behind to Rot – the Tory Levelling up Con Trick

I have long argued that the Tories’ promise to “level-up” Britain is a hoax. The Prime Minister recently boasted to Tory members in rock the solid Conservative Tunbridge Wells constituency in Kent, “I managed to start changing the funding formulas to make sure areas like this are getting the funding they deserved. We inherited a bunch of formulas from Labour that shoved all the funding into deprived urban areas and that needed to be undone. I started the work of



undoing that.”

This was the real face of the Tory party and its millionaire leader – stuff the deprived areas let’s

look after the rich. Figures reported by the news organisation, Bloomberg, have confirmed that this process of draining the money – and the lifeblood – from working class towns is the reality behind the rhetoric. Those who voted Tory in 2019 because disgraced ex-PM Johnson, were conned.

Under Boris Johnson's "levelling up" agenda, during 2021 some of the wealthiest parts of England, including areas represented by government ministers, were allocated 10 times more money per capita than the poorest. And Bloomberg's latest figures, based on their carefully compiled scorecard, show the pattern has continued under Johnson's Conservative Party imposed successors:

"More than three-quarters of constituencies — especially those in the Midlands and North of England — were already behind London and the South East in 2019 and have since fallen even further behind. The Scorecard also shows that 97% of so-called Red Wall seats — former industrial heartlands that swung from Labour to Conservative in 2019, the constituencies targeted by the levelling up message — are classified as falling behind." (Bloomberg UK, By Joe Mayes, Andre Tartar and Demetrios Pogkas, 25 January 2023)

Their scorecard reveals that as compared with 2019-2020 when Birkenhead was already miles behind relative to London, our town has suffered an overall 15% reduction in total government spending and an overall 60% reduction in total spending on transport in 2021- 2022. Our town gets £5 per person less on public spending and over £10 less on transport than London and the South East. This is levelling down – hitting the already most deprived towns like ours with vicious cuts. For all the big promises, we're seeing yet more managed decline for places outside London and the South East.

The allocation of the so-called levelling up funds was exposed this week with the announcement of £4.8 billion to successful bidders around the country. Analysis in The Times newspaper indicated 52 Tory constituencies in England will benefit – more than twice as many as those represented by Labour MPs. And Sunak ensured that £19 million went to his own constituency of Richmond in Yorkshire – not noted for its levels of deprivation.

This was a despicable exercise in pork barrel politics, with many failed bidders left with huge bills arising from the preparation of their failed bids. Even Tory the West Midlands Tory Mayor, Andy Street denounced this method of funding as broken because of the way in which the begging bowl had been passed round every local authority and region but with only a few getting anything from that bowl.

Moreover, this broken system of allocating levelling up money goes hand in hand with the levelling down cuts to local authority budgets which have been inflicted on Labour and Labour led councils since 2010. From that year to this Wirral Borough Council has suffered an average year on year cut to its budget of £162 million.

This inexorable erosion of support has led to the current budget crisis with the Council facing a deficit of £32 million. And from 2015-2016 to 2020-2021 the Council was forced to spend 6.4% less on the vital services that it manages. Our services are collapsing, our town is growing dirtier, our people are suffering above average levels of poverty linked diseases such as diabetes and our schools are teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

This is the reality of austerity since 2010 – and under Sunak's austerity mark two the Council is now facing the terrible dilemma of what to cut. My position is clear, there needs to be a battle

to save our services. There needs to be a battle with the real perpetrators of the cuts – the Tories. We cannot let our libraries and leisure services close. We cannot let our youth and adult services wither as their budgets shrink. We cannot allow our town or our borough to be shoved over the edge of bankruptcy so that Sunak can “redirect” funds to his rich supporters.

I have taken the fight into Parliament demanding meetings to discuss the crisis with the various Levelling Up Ministers that have come and gone. They are dodging me. They are hiding behind their diaries to avoid facing up to the fact that their levelling up agenda is a cruel deception. And I will stand with my Labour colleagues here in Birkenhead to support their efforts to defend our services and stop the Tory cuts.

If we fight, we might not win everything. If we don't fight, we risk losing everything. I think we should choose to fight. Put the needs of the people of Birkenhead first.

Death by a Thousand Cuts – the Destruction of the NHS

When the former Health Minister Sajid David suggested that patients should have to pay for visits to GPs and A and E departments Downing Street claimed they were not considering his proposals. Don't make me laugh. This government is deliberately engineering the worst crisis in the NHS' history because its long term goal is to complete the privatisation of health in this country.



Waiting lists for treatment are at record lengths and growing. Hospitals are full with patients stacked like planes above Heathrow on trolleys and in ambulances. Patients lucky enough to have a hospital bed cannot be discharged when they have recovered because the social care they require upon leaving

hospital isn't there.

Ambulance waiting times have soared. The average wait for an ambulance last year was 14 minutes while in the NHS in England more than 40% of crews were forced to wait at least half an hour to hand over patients in the week up to 1 January. That is the highest level since records began a decade ago. And in some notable cases patients have died waiting hours for an ambulance. Ironically waiting times for ambulances – notwithstanding Grant Shapps' sickening insults to ambulance staff on strike – have been better on strike days than on normal working days when the service is at full stretch.

When the Chief Executive of two NHS Trusts, Nick Hulme, told a board meeting that Hospitals

are “the worst place you can possibly be in the health system”, branding them as “not safe places. They are horrible places - the food's rubbish, we don't let you sleep, we don't let you know what's going on” I was not the slightest but surprised. He was merely highlighting what people know from their daily experience with the NHS.

By every single measure our health service performs worse than the comparable services in France and Germany, be it on cancer treatment and cardiology or hip replacements and heart surgery.

None of this chaos is a result of the strikes by nurses, ambulance staff and physiotherapists. They are front line workers doing their level best to save the service they have dedicated their working lives to. It is a result of years of cuts and neglect, cuts that very nearly left us at death's door when the Covid Pandemic struck. It was the heroic efforts of those workers who saved the lives of thousands and saved the service from collapse. Now the government is refusing to even talk to them about a pay rise.

The Tories are forever trumpeting the fact that they have allocated huge funds to the NHS – taking them above the European average of spending on health. But this post Covid cash injection is too little, too late. It does nothing to repair the cuts that caused today's crisis in the first place.

Before the pandemic spending had lagged way behind other leading economies, leaving the NHS creaking and ill-prepared. Analysis by the Health Foundation of OECD data shows that average health spending (not including social care) in the UK between 2010 and 2019 was £3,005 per person – 18% below the EU14 average of £3,655.

I believe that under this government the future of the NHS is at stake and Labour needs to set its stall out to save it – through funding, through the ending of all aspects of privatisation, through a radical reform of management that enable health workers to take control of the service they provide and that listens to the voices as well as attending to the needs of the patients and communities that the NHS serves.

Why I Support the Strikers

The many thousands of workers who are hitting the gates and striking over pay and conditions are one hundred per cent right to do so. There is no ambiguity from me – I support every strike that is taking place, every strike that is planned and I have been standing proudly on the picket lines of the local postal workers, nurses, ambulance staff, the dockers and the railway workers. I will be giving my full support to the Physiotherapists and the Teachers too.

Labour is the party of the trade unions and Labour MPs have a duty to stand with their supporters. And that is what I will always do.

It tells you what sort of state we are in when the Royal College of Nursing – which for 106 years had a no strike policy – has been taking strike action since December. It tells you that the pay the nurses – who everyone was clapping during the pandemic - is poverty pay.

For ten years workers' pay has fallen, and this year, up to May, real wages fell by an average of almost four per cent - the biggest annual drop since records began in 2001. This has left workers £1,600 a year worse off than they were in 2010. In Birkenhead, wages have fallen by



£3332, resulting in a cut of more than 10%.

And while inflation is now at 9.2% according to the government CPI index the more accurate RPI index has it at 13.4% now at over fourteen point per cent according to the Retail Price Index. The cost of essentials for workers – food, energy costs, rent and fuel – are even higher and the pay rises being fought for by the unions are desperately needed simply to catch up with the cost-of-living.

The Tories claim that the striking workers are being unreasonable and that the pay rises they were calling for were unaffordable. The bare faced cheek of this Tory pipsqueak is breath taking. He has an estimated personal fortune worth £730 million. And he has the gall to tell a nurse, whose pay is so low that they rely on food banks, that the government cannot afford a decent pay rise. Along with NHS wrecker Jeremy Hunt he has told the unions that they will not even negotiate with them.

Nurses, ambulance staff and others across the NHS never want to strike. They are the people caring for our loved ones. They are the people working double shifts to bring down the waiting lists caused by Tory cuts. They are the people who are overworked, underpaid, and coping with a crumbling service. That is why they – along with every other worker battling to survive by striking – need to know that Labour is 100% with them. Solidarity with the strikers until victory.

Sleazy does it



The New Statesman:

There have been many cases of high level corruption in governments around the world. But if there is a premier league for dodgy dealings by those in power this Tory government is doing its best to become a champion.

Boris Johnson gets a loan – his small fortune amassed as PM and then public speaker is not enough for the poor man to live on – of £800k courtesy of an introduction from Richard Sharp. Then Sharp gets the £160k job as Chairman of the BBC.

All a coincidence, according to Sharp who did no more than put Johnson in touch with a man offering a loan. Except information from the Cabinet Office's transparency data indicates that their relationship was somewhat more intimate than Sharp is claiming. According to the magazine,

“During his time in No 10, Johnson registered more meetings with Sharp, a former Goldman Sachs banker, than any other non-editorial media executive. According to transparency disclosures, published by the Cabinet Office and compiled last year by Press Gazette, Johnson met Sharp on six occasions between January 2021, when Sharp was chairman-designate of the BBC, and the summer of 2022, when Johnson left office.”

Sharp has insisted that there has been no wrongdoing!

Now the former Chancellor Nadhim Zahawi has been found out for being “careless” with his tax returns. As a result Zahawi – while being in charge of HMRC – was obliged to pay HMRC money back, plus a penalty charge of £5 million.

Let’s put to one side the fact that he has paid this eye watering sum without so much as denting his overall personal fortune. The fact that as boss of the nation’s tax affairs he was found guilty of carelessness with his own tax affairs is a staggering admission. And yet instead of being sacked by his fellow mega rich chum, Sunak, he has been defended by the Prime Minister.

He is still in post as Conservative Party Chair and is merely being subjected to a light touch check by Sunak’s own ethics adviser. This government of millionaires is rotten to the core. It is well past time for last orders. It is time for it to go.

Careless? No, they just couldn’t care less.

Out and About in Birkenhead

December and January – especially during the recess – gave me the time to get around our town to meet constituents and visit organisations and businesses.

My thanks to Berry for inviting me to open this exciting new initiative, the Oxtan Hubbub. This initiative is a real innovation. It is a credit to Berry and to the community here in Oxtan. It is an example that will catch the imagination of others and is part of a growing Refill Station movement in the country.

Using plastic bottles to get refills of things like washing liquid, detergents and shampoo is a brilliant way of cutting down on plastic pollution. Single use plastic containers are doing terrible damage to our environment.

On Small Business Saturday having previously worked with the Wirral Chamber of Commerce to publicise the work of a number of small businesses in Birkenhead I was delighted to visit the new Wards Fishmongers shop on the Grange Precinct. Simon, Nigel and their team have added a real star attraction to the high street with this new site for their amazing fish, game and other foodstuffs. I sincerely hope that their business continues to thrive.

I took several bags of toys to Radio City’s Cash for Kids charity initiative to ensure that no



child was left without a bag of presents this Christmas because of poverty. It is a fantastic charity and I know many of my constituents have benefited from its generosity.

As stated previously I visited the picket lines at hospitals and ambulance stations and was delighted to see so many strikers who – despite the terrible strain they are under – kept a smile on their face and a determination in their heart to make sure these services were fit for purpose for the people of Birkenhead.

After Christmas I met up with the workers from the Recovery Village who support people who are recovering from drug and alcohol use. They highlighted the need to provide spaces and entertainment for those in recovery other than pubs and clubs where they may be temptations that could cause problems. I have contacted various people to look at ways of supporting this amazing charity.

Following the tragic shooting in Wallasey and the arrests made in parts of Birkenhead I met with the police, the council and housing organisations and followed it up with a “reassurance” walkabout to let residents know that they would be supported during this tragic and stressful time.

I had the pleasure of meeting the people at “The Meeting Place” on Oxton Road, a charity that is setting out to help anyone who needs it with food and support sessions. Their shop on Oxton Road is an excellent venture offering low-cost food for the vulnerable in our community.

And just today I was privileged to visit the Lighthouse Centre, along with my colleague from Wirral West, Margaret Greenwood, to see first hand the fantastic work they are doing to support those who have suffered domestic abuse.

Birkenhead's Voice in Westminster



- The New Year kicked off with the Procurement Bill finishing its stages in the House of Lords and being sent to the Commons for scrutiny. I've long maintained that our current procurement regime is in dire need of reform. Procurement accounts for one pound in every three spent by central government and could be a huge force for public good - supporting local businesses, creating jobs, and driving growth in towns like Birkenhead. But too often lucrative contracts are awarded to large corporations and companies linked to offshore tax havens. Speaking during the Second Reading of the Procurement Bill, I criticised the government for failing to embed social value at the heart of a new progressive

procurement regime. That speech can be read here: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-01-09/debates/2936011F-A818-40FC-941B-D53E05672870/details#contribution-2B8EA981-DDC8-496D-BAF9-F76885FCFF94> I revisited this issue later in the month when I led a debate in Westminster Hall on the need to reform public procurement processes. That debate in its entirety can be read here: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-01-25/debates/70A6266F-7884-4BA8-A80C-0D4B5B0AB89C/details>

- As a life-long trade unionist, I know that the right to withdraw your labour is fundamental to any democracy - that's why it's protected by the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the European Social Charter, and International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions. But this month, the government began the first step in stripping that right from working people. The Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill seeks to force workers in key sectors including health, education, the fire service, and rail to maintain a minimum level of service during periods of industrial action. This is in spite of the fact that, after twelve years of Tory failure, many of these services can't maintain the minimum service that the public deserves even when workers aren't striking. The government are also ignoring the fact that unions have already entered into minimum service agreements in the NHS. During questions to the Business Secretary, I called on the government to recognise that these plans reaching breaching the UK's obligations in international law. That exchange can be viewed here: <https://twitter.com/MickWhitleyMP/status/1615411653251837953?s=20&t=3fgj7r3mUgpjiXaD10LsNg> During the Second Reading of the Bill, I also warned the government that "the labour movement is prepared to fight these proposals all the way". I promise to do just that and when the Bill returns for its third reading on Monday 30th, I'll once again be standing up against this assault on working people's most fundamental rights.
- The Government has announced its intention to repeal and rewrite all of the laws that we've inherited from European law - including vital workers' and data rights as well as consumer and environmental protections. Ministers' haven't been able to provide the exact number of laws that will be affected, but experts predict that it could be as many four thousand pieces of legislation. At a time when our economy is in recession and our health service at breaking point, it's hard to see this frankly colossal undertaking as anything other than a grotesque waste of governmental resources intended to placate the hard-right of the Tory party. Worse still, the Government's EU Retained Law (Reform and Revocation Bill) would give Ministers the power to rewrite these laws without meaningful scrutiny from MPs and Parliament. Speaking in Parliament, I said that not a single one of my constituents who voted for Brexit "voted for the kind of chaos that Ministers are preparing to let loose" and said that the Bill "represents a power grab on the part of the Executive of a kind almost unheard of in a parliamentary democracy". You can read that contribution on Hansard: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-01-18/debates/BD8058AD-784A-4E34-A21D-58B05D7DC48C/details#contribution-A60B1534-75D0-4906-B8BC-C4232280F0BC>
- More than eighty percent of journeys taken on the city region's public transport network are by bus. But in recent years, cuts to local bus services have left many communities in Birkenhead cut off during evenings and weekends. Metro Mayor Steve Rotheram has announced his plans to introduce bus franchising - laying the foundations for a more affordable and reliable bus service across Merseyside. But we need to go even further still. That's why I challenged the Transport Secretary to provide additional funding for local government to invest in local transport and called on the Government to revise the 2017 Bus Services Act to allow for combined authorities to create municipally-owned bus services that serve the needs of local communities and not private shareholders. That exchange can be viewed here: <https://twitter.com/MickWhitleyMP/status/1617865905337241600?s=20&t=WraZIYwELuF9YgRxgPxDJw>

- This month, Rishi Sunak received his second fixed penalty notice for failing to wear a seatbelt while in a moving vehicle. This makes him only the second Prime Minister after Boris Johnson to have been found to have broken the law while serving in Number Ten. Meanwhile, more seriously, Conservative Party Chairman Nadhim Zahawi has admitted to paying a penalty to HMRC to settle an estimated £5 million tax bill while serving as Chancellor. During Work and Pensions questions, I compared the light-touch treatment of senior government ministers who flout the law to the punitive benefit sanctions imposed on local people in Birkenhead for even the most minor of mistakes. That exchange can be seen here: <https://twitter.com/MickWhitleyMP/status/1618326856226185217?s=20&t=uf7DqodpcD2z4HPkjrCkxQ>
- Following on from concerns raised by constituents, I challenged the Building Safety Minister Lee Rowley on what more can be done to make apartment buildings safe from fire risks at the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Fire Safety and Rescue.