

THE CONVERSATION

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Rail workers union strikes a blow for collective bargaining

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Steam power. Do railway unions have a unique advantage in pay deals? Dazzie D, CC BY

News this week that the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union had called off threatened strike action on the railways undoubtedly came as a welcome relief to many travellers, workers and managers. The RMT is now considering a sharply increased pay offer and a “job security package” after some nail-biting negotiations. It might be less heartening news, however, to other public sector workers whose unions have delivered less.

Transport unions tend to have much higher profile than others, simply because their work has such an impact on everyone’s lives. This gives the RMT the strength and profile that workers and unions in most other occupations simply do not have. Its success though should get us thinking whether some of the tactics it has used could work in other sectors.

Selling points

So what advantages does the RMT have? It organises in a sector that affects almost everyone. Rail commuting in London is common, across the spectrum of professions. That means that a very wide range of people and businesses are disrupted during any rail strike and public pressure to resolve the problems builds very quickly.

Safety standards are also extremely important to both the companies that provide services and to the customers who use them, so it is very difficult to replace rail workers with untrained staff if they take industrial action. Also, the range of occupations in the rail industry is relatively small and focused on

one key goal; making the trains run safely and on time. As a result, strong solidarities develop that transfer over into union membership.

With that background, it's not surprising that RMT negotiators have a strong hand to play in bargaining meetings. Even the threat of action can create public concern that adds to the urgency of reaching a deal. So could that be reproduced in other sectors? Well in all honesty, probably not.

Burnt offerings

Firefighters are probably the most similar to rail workers in that they also work closely together, in highly trained jobs and with a strong public focus – in this case on ensuring effective fire cover. But firefighters face the problem that if they withdraw their services entirely, the consequences could be catastrophic – and deadly. Rail workers are only inconveniencing us when they strike.

This means that deals are often done to make sure that essential cover is in place during rare strikes by the Fire Brigades Union. It may be the right thing to do, but it dilutes the strike impact and muddies the waters for negotiation.



Fighting fire with fire. Possibly foolish. UK Ministry of Defence, CC BY-NC

Meanwhile, workers in sectors or occupations where a strike would cause minimal disruption have increasingly found that the very serious legal hurdles aimed at limiting strike action usually mean that the “costs” outweigh the potential “benefits”. The simple calculation is one of the main reasons why we have seen such a fall in strike action in recent years.

United front

So if strikes are difficult, disruptive and costly for everyone, how can the collective process of negotiating terms and conditions of work be effective? After all, this is one of the main reasons for unions to exist: to bargain for a group of workers over their terms and conditions of employment: pay, holidays, training and the like. Collective bargaining has a fundamental rationale: it takes away the danger that managers treat individual workers arbitrarily and makes sure that the rules of the game are clear to both sides.

Historically, the ultimate “threat” in the bargaining process has been to stop work. Unions could threaten strike action and employers could threaten to lock workers out of the workplace. Both mean that workers take a (hopefully) short-term hit to their pay, in the hope that the benefits of the eventual collective agreement improve things enough to offset that hit.

But eventually work has to restart and the two sides have to rub along together again. As a result, it is rare to find a negotiator from either side who thinks it is a good idea to let negotiations get to a position of using the “nuclear option”.



Non-flying pickets. A reference for the kids there. Roger Blackwell, CC BY

Today in the UK, as a result of legal changes in the 1980s and 1990s, strike action is hard to take within the legislative constraints. As a result, collective bargaining in the UK has changed. The difficult of calling a strike means that it can be used in a more targeted way and means that if a union wins a ballot for strike action, both sides know that there is a real strength of feeling about the issue.

That in turn reinforces the hand of the union negotiators and – as happened with the RMT – often helps ensure a deal is done before the first declared strike day. The rail workers may have other advantages at their disposal, as we discussed above, but the most powerful might be their simple willingness to walk out. The flip-side of this, of course, is that where strike action is harder to organise, so collective bargaining can lose its power.

Rare beast

There is a broader concern here too: collective bargaining, when it works, remains one of the most effective ways of reducing inequality across an economy as a whole. As the UK has made union representation and collective bargaining more and more difficult, the difference between the lowest and highest-paid workers has increased dramatically, bringing with it a lot of social problems.

Although there are some high-profile examples of strike threats – and even some successful strike action – these are increasingly rare and dependent on a specific set of factors that increase the influence of workers and their unions at key moments in time such as is the case with the RMT.

Looking to the future, proposed new laws mean that unions are likely to face even greater constraints on strike ballots. Collective bargaining will carry on because it makes sense in many large organisations; it gives a legitimacy to the way pay is decided. But the likelihood is that we will probably see even less evidence of strike threats in future, and brinkmanship of the type the RMT pulled off this week will become ever more rare.

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