

The battle of Saltley Gate – a chance of repeat?

The battle of Saltley Gate was a national coal miners' strike in the UK that began on 9 January 1972 and was the first official national miners' strike since the General Strike in 1926¹. The miners asked for a pay rise of between 35-47%, yet the National Coal Board was only prepared to pay 7.4%². This led to a cessation of production of all 289 coal mines in the UK³. Despite supplies that would last for 8 weeks, it became clear that the stockpiles are unevenly located across the country, leading to rapid shortages of coal in some regions⁴. By beginning of February 1972, first signs of power outages appeared. When a miner got killed by a lorry driver⁵, the picketing became more violent yet also more supportive – as other industries joined the strikes of the miners in solidarity. This ultimately led to a settlement with pay rises of up to 27%⁶. However, the impact of the strikes could be felt years later when the UK government introduced a 3-day week from 31 December 1973 until 7 March 1974 in order to reduce energy demand, while coal workers were striking yet again⁷. The battle of Saltley Gate was led by a series of unofficial strikes that began in 1969 after which unions took on a more militant approach, especially in the Yorkshire area. Ironically, the number of strikes increased after 1968, when the Wilson government changed British labour law by requiring strikes to take place after a member vote and fining unions for unofficial strikes to reduce the number of days lost to strikes (Donovan Commission). Sounds familiar? Indeed, Sunak is looking to pass a new law that ensures minimum service is maintained during strikes. People look at the winter of discontent of 1979/80, yet instead we should be looking at the early 70s to draw similarities and conclusions, because this is the time when unions started growing their membership.

¹ "The Battle of Saltley Gate". Birmingham Mail. Birmingham. 23 January 2012. p. 6

² Routledge, Paul (4 January 1972). "Fresh talks to avert pit strike: union chief says sides 'not so far apart'". The Times. No. 58366. London. p. 13.

³ Routledge, Paul (14 January 1972). "Miners reject plea by NCB chief to seek arbitration". The Times. No. 58375. London. p. 2.

⁴ Vielvoye, Roger (8 January 1972). "Miners' union chief says industrial coal stocks are likely to run down quickly". The Times. No. 58370. London. p. 17

⁵ "Picketing miner killed by lorry as Government moves towards declaring emergency". The Times. No. 58393. London. 4 February 1972. p. 1.

⁶ Travis, Alan (1 January 2003). "Flying pickets paralysed Heath cabinet". The Guardian.

⁷ "British Economics and Trade Union politics 1973–1974". The National Archives (UK Government records).

UK Unions

There are a total of 98 unions in the UK counting over 6 million members, which is around 23% of the working population⁸ - this compares to 13 million members or over 50% of the population in the late 70s⁹ (union membership initially began to grow from 8.9mio in 1968 to 10.4mio in 1974¹⁰). Most unions charge between £1.3 to £36 a month in fees and offer free services such as legal advice or even discounts on certain brands. In many cases there are multiple unions representing a certain group of workers and it can happen that some unions agree on an offer, but one union rejects the offer, which will then reject the offer for all unions. In recent inflationary times, unions have been extremely effective in arranging pay rises for their members. For example, in November and December 2022 alone the below agreements have on average achieved a pay rise of 14% over 2022-2023. These are only pay rises agreed by the 2nd largest union, Unite. We are now at a stage where everyone is chasing this average pay rise – it became the benchmark – and unions are fighting hard to justify their existence. Since the topic is big in the media, there will likely be a rise in union members going forward and the issue of strikes will likely only be resolved over the very short-term.

UK's largest unions

Union	Members (in thousands)
Unison	1,418
Unite	1,246
GMB	602
RCN	484
NEU	457
USDAW	403
NASUWT	312
CWU	189
PCSU	177
BMA	158
P	151

Source: TUC

⁸ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/unions>

⁹ Andrew Charlwood, "The anatomy of union membership decline in Great Britain 1980–1998" (PhD . Diss. The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), 2013), Bibliography pp 212–22.

¹⁰ http://humanities.uwe.ac.uk/bhr/Main/trade_union/11_strike.htm

Pay rises agreed under Unite Union in November/December 2022

Company	Department	Employees	Agreement in %
Biffa	Wirral council trash collection	200	15%
Menzies	Heathrow Airport ground handlers	400	10.5%
Go North East	Engineers at certain depots	150	10-13.1%
Greencore	Drivers and production workers	700	20-33%
Wincanton	Tanker drivers	150	20.7-37.1%
Rolls Royce Motor Cars	Production workers	1,200	14.8-17.6%
Felixstowe port	Port workers	1,900	7% + 8.5%
NHS Scotland	NHS workers	155,800	7.5-11.24%
OCS New Covent Garden Market	Security guards	?	22%
Metroline	Bus drivers	2,000	11%
Stagecoach	Bus drivers	3,000	10-20%
West Midlands Metro	Tram crew	170	20.1%
GXO	Draymen	1,000	9.5-12.5%
Telford Heinz	Factory workers	150	11%
National Express	Bus drivers	2,400	14%
Princes Group	Food workers	700	11.5%
ASDA	Supermarket workers	?	14%
Arriva	Bus drivers	80	14%
Peel Ports Liverpool	Dockers	600	14.3-18.5%

Source: Unite Union

The Heath Ministry

Edward Heath was Conservative Prime Minister between 1970 and 1974. During his time as PM, the union bosses grew more militant, which ultimately led Heath to call for a general election as it became clear to him that unions wanted him to succumb to Labour that ultimately did happen. Back then, same as now, there was an energy crisis – first, caused by the striking miners, and then, by the Arab oil embargo on the back of the Yom Kippur War. The price spike and striking miners led Heath to call for a 3-day work week, which resulted in consumer behaviour changes and higher productivity – similar to what occurred during lockdowns from Covid. Back then, the UK was joining the EU with skepticism, as they do now by leaving the EU. History once again rhymes and this tells me that union membership will climb from here and the issue of strikes is not going to be a temporary phenomenon as it was in 2011.

Similarities between early 1970s and now

Parameter	Early 1970s	Now
EU membership	Joining with skepticism	Leaving with skepticism
Ruling Party	Conservatives	Conservatives
Energy crisis	Israel/OPEC 6x oil hike	Russia/Ukraine 6x gas hike
Energy reduction	3-day week	Covid lockdowns
Economy	Strong economy, low unemployment	Strong economy, low unemployment
Unions	Began increasing their membership	Low point of membership

Source: "When the lights went out" by Andy Beckett



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