

# Strike statistics in Britain: Presenting new data for 2018 to 2023

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## Executive Summary

This research covers the six years between 2018 and 2023, providing previously unavailable data by which a more accurate picture can be gained of the state of industrial collective conflict in Britain. This is especially so on the issues of balloting and industrial short of a strike.

### Key Points

- 38,880 ballots for strike and industrial action were undertaken by unions.
- Union members undertook 2,137 instances of strike action on 14,595 days.
- Union members undertook 9,522 instances of industrial action short of a strike on 649,228 days.
- The contribution of the NASUWT teachers' union in 2023 alone to the total number of ballots between 2018 and 2023 was 57%.
- The contribution of the NASUWT teachers' union in 2023 to the total number of days upon which industrial action short of a strike was staged in that year was 99%, and this represented 96% of all such instances in the period 2018 to 2023.
- Most unions (64%) have neither balloted for industrial action nor taken any kind of industrial action between the 2018 and 2023. However, most members are not members of these small and specialist unions.
- At the time of writing in June 2025, the *Trade Union Act 2016* is still in force as the *Employment Rights Bill* has still to become an Act by being put on the statue book and being given effect by ministerial instruction in terms of the date of its implementation.

## Introduction: The demand for data

Every year the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has traditionally provided annual data on the number of strikes, the numbers of workers involved in these strikes and the number of days not worked in these strikes (roughly the number of workers involved x number of days the strikes lasted) (see Table 1).<sup>1</sup> The ONS also provided data by year on

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<sup>1</sup> This does not mean that the ONS data is or has been entirely reliable in terms of its robustness and rigour. Lyddon (2025) highlighted a major change in the way the ONS classifies what is a single strike and its impact upon the volume of strikes recorded. There are also some other issues highlighted by Lyddon (2021) and Hodder and Mustchin (2023,2025).

the number of ballots undertaken for strikes and industrial action short of a strike (IASOS) as well as their ballot outcomes (see Table 2). However, the ONS has never provided data on the frequency of industrial action short of a strike (IASOS) such as work-to-rules and overtime bans which are often referred to as ‘cut-price actions’.

In May 2019, the ONS released its last to-date annual report on strikes, covering the year 2018. Data covered by year the number of strikes, the numbers of workers involved in these strikes and the number of days not worked in these strikes. For the first time in over a decade, in 2017 the ONS did not also provide annual data on the number of ballots undertaken for strikes and IASOS (and their ballot outcomes). This was because it believed using the data from the Electoral Reform Services (ERS) – now Civica Election Services - was no longer providing a reliably comprehensive picture of the number of ballots undertaken, especially given that other balloting agencies existed and even though ERS was then the main balloting agency.

**Table 1: Strike statistics, 2010-2018**

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Working days not worked ('000s)	365	1390	249	444	788	170	322	276	273
Workers involved ('000s)	133	1530	237	395	733	81	154	33	39
Number of strikes	92	149	131	114	155	106	101	79	81

Source: ONS

**Table 2: Balloting data, 2002-2016**

Year	Total number of ballots	Ballots for striking	For	Against	Split result	Ballots for IASOS	For	Against	Split result
2002	806	738	613	113	12	537	519	16	2
2003	899	825	684	125	16	638	601	31	6
2004	952	901	746	142	13	759	709	41	9
2005	815	775	663	103	9	604	562	35	7
2006	1341	1290	1094	140	57	577	541	27	9
2007	767	713	637	64	12	583	555	19	9
2008	834	786	658	123	13	598	559	30	9
2009	579	561	458	93	10	435	407	21	7
2010	579	555	487	61	7	411	399	5	7
2011	994	964	903	51	9	388	375	8	5
2012	601	585	487	89	8	366	349	15	2
2013	494	469	417	48	4	318	279	33	6
2014	650	628	550	68	10	368	329	36	3
2015	568	558	503	50	5	417	404	12	1
2016	488	466	436	24	6	346	334	10	2

Source: Electoral Reform Services via ONS.

Note: Most ballots were for both striking and IASOS while some were for just IASOS.

When the ONS restarted strike data collection in the summer of 2022, it undertook to provide data for the period of the pandemic for which data collection was suspended. So far this has not happened so that there is a gap in ONS strike data covering 1 February 2020 to 31 December 2021. Just as importantly the ONS now publishes the data on a monthly basis and not also on an annual basis so that there is also an additional absence of annual data for the years 2022, 2023 and 2024 (in addition to the years 2019 to 2021). Although the number of days not worked annually can be calculated from the monthly number of days not worked (2022: 2.514m; 2023: 2.660m; 2024: 0.733m), this is not true of the workers involved nor the number of strikes.

Consequently, there is a need to provide strike data on the missing period and on a more comprehensive annual basis as well as on balloting incidences (frequency, outcomes). This gap cannot be filled by StrikeMap – see <https://strikemap.org/about> - because it is reliant upon union activists and members to voluntarily submit instances to it and because it counts a strike in each individual workplace as one strike rather than part of a single strike which may involve many different workplaces of the same employer. It is not, therefore, a suitable source to fill gaps in data from ONS reporting.

Fortunately, something of a ‘silver lining’ from the ‘black cloud’ of the *Trade Union Act 2016* – in the context that unions seeking to have legal standing are required to gain a certificate of independence from the Certification Officer - is that unions registered with the Certification Officer must provide in their annual returns data on all ballots and industrial action undertaken. This also includes data on IASOS so that for the first time ever there is longitudinal data on IASOS, that is, annual time series data on IASOS. Lastly, the data from the Certification Officer is by union so that the overall data can be disaggregated by union unlike the ONS data.

The following is an initial presentation of the data for the period 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2023, with further analysis to be presented later, particularly when further full data – for example, for the year 2024 – becomes available from the Certification Officer.

How to cite: Gall, G. (2025) *Strike statistics in Britain: Presenting new data for 2018 to 2023*, Centre for Employment Relations, Innovation and Change, University of Leeds, Leeds

URL: <https://business.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/download/367/strike-statistics-in-britain>

Funding from the following organisations is gratefully acknowledged:

Principal funder: The Amiel-Melburn Trust

Secondary funder: The Lipman-Miliband Trust

Donations given by the following organisations and unions: ASLEF, CWU, FBU, NEU, NUJ, PCS, POA, Prospect, TSSA, UCU and UNITE as well as NIPSA, STUC, TUC and Wales TUC.

Help from the Certification Office and Marcia Damalie, its Service Improvement Manager, is also gratefully acknowledged.

## Data caveats and qualifications

Several caveats and qualifications must be noted.

- The *Trade Union Act 2016* does not apply to Northern Ireland but it is unclear whether unions have or have not included data on balloting and industrial action in Northern Ireland in their annual returns.
- Not all unions provide annual returns based upon calendar years. Where this is the case, the data has been entered into the year for which most of the data applies.
- Cases of unofficial action (strike, IASOS) are not included in the data. However, as there are still very few cases of either type of industrial action, this data remains robust.
- Some other instances of industrial action are not captured because either the action is not taken by union members, is neither official or unofficial action sanctioned by or involving a union, or because there is no *de jure* employment relationship. Such cases include the Law Society Scotland in 2024, barristers in England in 2022, GPs in England in 2024 and various overtime bans and work-to-rules (such as train drivers and police officers in Scotland).
- Prison officers have no lawful right to take any kind of industrial action so undertaking statutory ballots for action is not practiced by the POA union.

## Balloting variables

In considering the data on balloting, several points must be borne in mind, especially when considering any comparisons with the period before 2017. First, the *Trade Union Act 2016* required unions from 1 March 2017 to re-ballot every six months if they wished to maintain their lawful mandate for action. Second, unions can choose to hold separate ballots on strike action and IASOS rather than putting the two questions on them in the same ballot. For example, the GMB union often chose to ask balloted groups the two questions separately. Third, and especially so in the public sector, unions can choose to pursue aggregated or disaggregated ballots for a national bargaining unit, based upon their assessment of which tactic is likely to yield the strongest mandate. The UCU union has used both tactics while the NASUWT union chose in 2023 to ballot all its thousands of groups in individual schools separately. Fourth, the decision to ballot or not ballot is influenced by unions' assessment of the likelihood of winning the ballot in the context of the new thresholds imposed by the *Trade Union Act 2016* for attaining a lawful mandate for action (majority turnouts, all those voting 'yes' equating to 40% of all those entitled to vote).

## Balloting data

Between 1 January 2018 and 31 December 2023, unions undertook 38,880 ballots.

- Amongst the unions engaging in more ballots than others were the CSP (424), GMB (3,060), NASUWT (22,193), NEU (309), RCN (304), RMT (768), UNISON (5,379), UNITE (2,949) and UCU (2,256). These nine unions accounted for 97% of all the

ballots undertaken, with the NASUWT itself accounting for 57% of all ballots undertaken.

- By year, 2018 saw 3% of all the ballots for the six years; 2019: 4%; 2020: 3%; 2021: 3%; 2022: 5%; and 2023: 82%. The higher levels of balloting in 2022 and 2023 corresponds (even without including the NASUWT's 21,836 ballots in 2023) to the campaign for higher pay rises in the cost-of-living crisis. Of the 38,880 ballots, just over 10,000 (10,018) or 26% did not attain a simple majority voting for action (either or both strike action and IASOS). Of the 38,880 ballots, nearly 21,000 (20,862) or 54% did not attain a simple majority turnout for voting for action (either or both strike action and IASOS) as required by the *Trade Union Act 2016*.
- Of the 38,880 ballots, nearly 12,000 (11,848) or 30% did not attain, when required, the threshold of those that voted for action (either or both strike action and IASOS) also equating to 40% of all those entitled to vote as required by the *Trade Union Act 2016*.

However, two points should be noted. First, the way some unions provided the data means that the failure to attain the 40% threshold is somewhat overstated because responses (negative ones) were given where none were required. Second, the case of the NASUWT in just 2023 (21,836 ballots) can be seen to 'skew' the data to a significant extent for the whole period 2018 to 2023, accounting for 80% of all those cases of ballots not attaining a simple majority voting for action (either or both strike action and IASOS); 57% of all those cases of ballots not attaining a simple majority turnout for voting for action (either or both strike action and IASOS); and 90% of all those cases of ballots not attaining, when required, the 40% threshold.

Nonetheless, the annual level of balloting even before the cost-of-living crisis of 2022-2023 was in excess of 1,000 ballots per year so that with the minority of unions balloting separately for strike action and IASOS, the level of balloting is likely to have been higher than for the period 2002-2016. In terms of the results of the ballots, comparisons are not straight-forward given the new regulatory regime required by the *Trade Union Act 2016*, where the two new balloting thresholds may have inclined unions not to proceed to organise (statutory) ballots after consultative exercises with members. Nonetheless, the level of failure between 2002-2016 was lower - at around 15% - than it was for 2018-2023.

### **Strike data**

From 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2023, unions members undertook 2,137 instances of strike action accounting for 14,595 days of strike action.<sup>2</sup> This is, of course, not synonymous with the total number of days not worked because as the number of

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<sup>2</sup>A one-day strike was taken by CSP members in early 2023 but because it was not recorded in the union's annual return for 2023, it is not recorded here. It would have accounted for some 4,200 members and 4,200 days not worked. The union annual return for 2023 also erroneously contains the exact same balloting data for 2022 (which was for 2022).

members/workers involved taking the strike action was not required to be given by *Trade Union Act 2016*, a figure for the total number of days not worked cannot be given. This problem is accentuated by ONS not providing annual data on days not worked due to strikes.

### **IASOS data**

From 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2023, unions undertook 9,522 instances of industrial action short of a strike on 649,228 days. As the number of members/workers involved taking the action was not required to be given by *Trade Union Act 2016*, a figure for the total number of days concerned cannot be given. Nonetheless, this sizeable volume is accounted for by continuous actions and of these 96% is accounted for the actions of the NASUWT and of the NASUWT's actions here, 99% were taken in 2023. Here the actions ran mostly from 18 September 2023 continuously through to 31 December 2023, comprising 69 days actions.

### **Data by union**

The unions organising more than 100 strikes between 2018 and 2023 were: GMB, NASUWT, NEU, RCN, RMT, UNISON, UNITE and UCU. The unions organising more than 100 instances of IASOS were the NASUWT and UNISON.

In the period 1 January 2018 to 31 December 2023, the following 83 unions, accounting for 64% of unions registered with the Certification Officer as of 31 December 2023, undertook no industrial ballots or any type of industrial action: Accord, Advance, Aegis, Affinity, Aircrew Officers Association Europe, App Drivers and Couriers Union, Artists Union England, Associated Train Crew Union, Association for Clinical Biochemistry & Laboratory Medicine, Association of Flight Attendants, Association of Local Authority Chief Executives, Association of Local Council Clerks, Association of Trade Union Political and Public Sector Staff, Association of Revenue and Customs, Association of School and College Leaders, Autonomous Workers' Union, Balfour Beatty Group Staff Association, Boots Pharmacists' Association, British Association of Dental Nurses, British Association of Journalists, British Association of Occupational Therapists, British Dental Association, British Orthoptic Society Trade Union, Cabin Crew Union UK, Confederation of British Surgery, Criminal Justice Workers Union, Currys Trade Union, Driver and General Union, Employees General Union, Empower, Employees United, Equal Justice Union, Equality For Workers Union, Equity, Financial Services Union, Fire and Rescue Services Association, Fire Officers' Association, G4S Care and Justice Services Staff Association, Independent Federation of Nursing in Scotland, Industrial Workers of the World, Leeds Building Society Colleague Association, Leek United Building Society Staff Association, Locum Doctors' Association, NAPO - The Trade Union and Professional Association for Family Court and Probation Staff, National Association of Racing Staff, National Crime Officers Association, National House Building Council Staff Association, National Society for Education in Art and Design, National Union of Mineworkers, National Union of Professional Foster Carers, Nationwide Group Staff Union, News Union, North of England Zoological Society Staff Association, Palm Paper Staff Association, PDA Union, POA, Prison Governors Association, Professional

Cricketers Association, Professional Footballers' Association, Professional Footballers Association Scotland, Psychotherapy and Counselling Union, Retail Book Stationery and Allied Trades Employees Association, RSPB Staff Association, The Rugby Players Association, Security Industry Federation, Sales Staff Association, Scottish Artists Union, Skyshare, The Social Workers Union, The Society of Authors, Society of Union Employees (UNISON), Solid Trade Union, Solidarity, Trade Union for Ethnic Minority Social Workers, UK Private Hire Drivers Union, Union of General & Volunteer Workers, Union Workers' Union, WALGAS TU, Warwick International Staff Association, Welsh Rugby Players Association, Women's Rugby Association, Workers of England Union, and the Writers Guild of Great Britain.

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