Digital Trade Union Work: Correcting Misinformation About Strike Action

Cat Morgan, James Richards & Kate Sang
The UK is experiencing a resurgence of trade union activism despite long-term membership/density decline. Further/intensified government intervention in industrial relations, e.g., Trade Union Act 2016 (Tuckman, 2018). Part of a 40 year plus project to "kettle" the unions, i.e., latest: Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill (2023). Right-wing media accounts set the narrative, e.g., largely based on recycling 1970s stereotypes, demonising unions, etc. Rise of social media/decline of daily newspapers equated to wider loosening grip of mainstream media. Rapid increase of interest in UK industrial relations – a time for unions to use new forms of ICTs to shape the narrative?
Wider social issues

- Cost of Living Crisis
- Rise in inflation
- Poverty pay vs. Living wage
- Anti-union government
- Class war
- Right-wing media
- Worker against worker
Our research aims to explore how trade unions use social media to organise members, correct misinformation and educate the public on workers' conditions and the real reasons for industrial action.
• 5917 tweets were collected from the @RMTUnion account, from June to December 2022
• Thematic analysis was used to identify emergent themes, which were developed over three months
• Approx. 200 tweets were coded from each month at the beginning of the process, during which fourteen thematic codes were developed
Data analysis

**Codes**

- Action – strikes, marches, protests and picket lines
- Campaigning – RMT ethos and issues
- Celebrity, well-known individual or group
- Correction of misinformation
- Covid-19 – workers during and the impact following the pandemic
- Humour or sarcasm to defuse the situation
- Leadership of RMT
- Membership and being a member of RMT
- Media coverage and commentary
- Politics (formal), the Government and the law
- Repercussions of cuts and changes on both workers and passengers
- Social media used by RMT (including Web1.0 email)
- Solidarity with RMT or from RMT to other unions
- Train operating companies (& other companies P&O, Churchill)
Data summary

- 49% - Campaigning – RMT ethos and issues
- 29% - Politics (formal), the Government and the Law
- 27% - Corrections of misinformation
  - 12% Campaigning
  - 11% Politics
  - 5% Humour/sarcasm
Revenue strikes are illegal in the UK

Can someone please tell the man with the wallpaper made of gold that this is not a train drivers strike! #ToryRailStrikes

Partridge in a pear tree. The rant before Christmas. Call it what you will but enjoy and share Richard Madeley interviewing himself! #SupportRailWorkers
RMT members don’t get paid for being on strike. I think you may have fallen for some less than accurate reporting in the press.

11:50 AM - Jul 4, 2022

1 Quote 2 Likes

RMT Reply to @LondonComment

Oh, she knew exactly what she was doing. Demonising workers so that we’re all fighting each other is a long-standing part of the Murdoch playbook.

1:15 PM - Nov 5, 2022

21 Retweets 1 Quote 379 Likes

RMT Reply to @driekbailey

So, are you suggesting we shouldn’t respond to a journalist posting deliberate falsehoods? She is inciting abuse toward a group of workers who aren’t even involved in our dispute. Does truth no longer matter?

10:08 AM - Nov 5, 2022

8 Likes

You’re right. The public don’t deserve these #TonyRailStrikes. God knows our members don’t deserve the scandalous way they’re being treated. If only we had a media that was prepared to shine a light on Tory incompetence on Anglo.

9:40 AM - Jun 21, 2022

32 Retweets 2 Quotes 195 Likes

Angela Epstein @adepsteinl - Jun 21, 2022

How ironic that @RMTunion strike starting on this, the longest day of year - certainly will be so for anyone struggling to get to work, go to school, hospital appointments, visit loved ones. Public don’t deserve this #Strikes #Solstice

Funny how the same right-wing media types that accuse @RMTunion of defending Victorian working practices and of being stuck in the 1970’s use terms like “signalman”.

Kelvin Mackenzie @kelvirmackenzie - Dec 15, 2022

Thought you would like to know average earnings for a railway signalman is £53K and £70K+ for a signal supervisor. Feel free to give Mr Lynch a signal.

8:51 PM - Dec 15, 2022 - 43.8K Views

0 Retweets 2 Quotes 543 Likes

The only thing you are doing is stuffing things up...then lying about it!

Sky News @SkyNews - Jun 25, 2022

“People were absolutely fed up hearing about things I stuffed up, this endless chum of stuff, when they wanted to hear what is this guy doing”

trib.al/xRiacQj

2:34 PM - Jun 25, 2022

58 Retweets 1 Quote 308 Likes 1 Bookmark

Andrew Pierce @storyboypercie - Jun 8, 2022

Average train driver earns £58,000 a week. There will be no public support for RMT rail strike. They’re trying to wreck the economy

8:57 AM - Jun 8, 2022

1,472 Retweets 97 Quotes 14.2K Likes
Formal politics & the government

#ToryIncompetence

This is a deliberate misrepresentation and a highly calculated one as well. This government thinks that if it repeats a lie often enough it will become an accepted fact. However, we know the British public can smell a rat and will continue to support RailWorkers.

Peter Stefanovic @PeterStefanovic2 - Jul 4, 2022

Transport Secretary @grantshapps deliberately misrepresents the salaries of RMTunion members taking strike action to undermine public support. But the game is up - the public now knows it can't believe a word this Government says on anything.

RMT @RMTrumon - Jul 27, 2022

This morning, @grantshapps has been 'spouting nonsense' about the #RailStrikes. For example, he falsely claims Sunday working laws haven't changed since 1919. This is just another Grant Shapps fantasy.

#SupportRailWorkers

"DID YOU KNOW, SUNDAY WORKING LAWS HAVEN'T BEEN UPDATED SINCE 1919"

Kwasi, I think you'll find that @Conservatives have made grinding our economy to a halt a specialty subject!

This, however, is just the latest step in a clampdown on democratic rights which every trade unionist and democrat must oppose.

Kwasi Kwarteng @KwasiKwarteng - Jul 21, 2022

Today we changed the law to allow businesses impacted by strike action to hire skilled, temporary workers to mitigate disruption. This was a criminal offence. Now it's an option for business.

We will not let trade unions grind our economy to a halt.

#ToryLiars

#ToryCostOfLivingCrisis
Formal politics & the government

Gospel of Grant Shapps: "This £1 billion investment will allow us to replace unreliable Victorian infrastructure."

Truth: There are no Victorian signals on the East Coast Mainline. They were replaced years ago.

#SupportRailWorkers @RMTunion

Gospel of Grant Shapps: "There's been a nearly 40% increase in salaries over the last 10 years."

Truth: The ONS calculated there was an increase of 24% over the last 10 years, not 40%. It's similar to the 23% increase for all employees over the same period. Inflation over that decade was about 20%.

#SupportRailWorkers @RMTunion

Gospel of Grant Shapps: "The median salary for the rail sector is £44,000."

Truth: The majority of people involved in the RMT dispute earn between £25,000 and £31,000.

#SupportRailWorkers @RMTunion

Gospel of Grant Shapps: "You've got to have the right people in the room to settle these things. I can't settle this dispute."

Truth: But Grant, you fund the industry, you set the Train Operating Companies' mandate, you have to sign off any agreements... as you're admitting... and the TOCs have signed contracts saying you get to run any dispute or they get fired... So you can settle it can't you?

#SupportRailWorkers @RMTunion
Leaders & representation

"Mick Lynch effect"

I think because they're genuine, they're passionate and, regardless of if you agree with them or not, they're honest. Also, they've been around the trade union movement for many years and are used to public speaking and hostile audiences.

A question how does the @RMTUnion produce General Secretary's Jimmy Knapp, Bob Crow, Mick Cash and Mick Lynch who are great communicators

Mick Lynch, and all senior @RMTUnion officials, donate their salary on strike days to the dispute hardship fund.

If we woke up tomorrow and the Billionaires were gone, there'd be no change to the running order of our daily lives. If the same happened to the workers, the country would grind to a halt. And they know it. - Eddie Dempsey
Strikes & picket lines

Train strike is off but too late to persuade lazy journalists to check just who was on strike in the first place!

It's just easier to demonise workers than Google. Some basic facts isn't it, Isabel?!

What. wait, did you think they would throw bricks at you or something? I think you may have been listening to too much Kay Burley. I suggest you stick to denying climate change!

Matthew Lesh @matthewlesh  15 hours ago

Strolled straight past the RMT picket line for my train.

A pretty pathetic effort from the strikers. Barely anyone bothered to show up, no screams of 'stop'!

#TubeStrikes
#RailStrikes
#DogsOnPickets
Reasons for the dispute

#CutProfitsNotJobs

Train drivers are responsible for up to 1,500 lives and are worth every penny. That said, @RMTUnion dispute is not about train drivers, or their pay. Rather than making redundant comparisons why not campaign for better remuneration for doctors? twitter.com/MarkmacDC/stat...

11:38 AM - Aug 7, 2022

#EndPovertyPay

Great tweet! Wrong on absolutely every front. @RMTUnion dispute is about pay, conditions and safety - not politics. RMT has not been affiliated to @Unilabour for 20 years. RMT General Secretary is not a communist and his name is Mick Lynch. Good try though!

@Laurencewinston @Laurencewinston - Aug 20, 2022

Replying to @AndyBlumbergGM

It was your paymasters @RMTUnion that caused a needless political strike RMT are of course led by communist mick bryant.

1:27 PM - Aug 20, 2022

#PayJustice

Hi Lelia, that’s not easy in a tweet. Essentially its about cuts to maintenance staff, compulsory redundancies and pay. This document may help.

isoiu.com
RMT Rail Dispute Update - July 2022

12:02 PM - Aug 10, 2022

#EndOutsourcing

Our union represents workers across the rail industry and we are striking to defend jobs, pay and conditions. The #RailStrikes are not about train drivers pay.

@Bumblingbadger1 @Bumblingbadger1 - Jun 19, 2022

RMTUnion The average base pay for a driver In the UK is £54,001 per year and you want more 🙄

4:39 PM - Jun 19, 2022

#ReasonsForTheDispute

Actually, rail staff feel that the rail industry’s plan for stations and ticket offices, which would lead to de-skilling and reductions in staffing, would impact the safety and security of both staff and passengers.

Ian Bryson @Ian_in_Formby - Aug 4, 2022
Replying to @NickT17185 and @RMTUnion

Don’t think that there is any suggestion that there shouldn’t be any station staff to do that.

12:29 PM - Aug 4, 2022
Repercussions of closures & cuts

#KeepTicketOfficesOpen

Actually, rail staff feel that the rail industry’s plan for stations and ticket offices, which would lead to de-skilling and reductions in staffing, would impact the safety and security of both staff and passengers.

@IanBryden (Aug 4, 2022)

RMT
@RMTUnion

Don’t think that there is any suggestion that there shouldn’t be any station staff to do that.

12:29 PM · Aug 4, 2022

37 Retweets 2 Quotes 230 Likes

#StaffOurStations

Ticket office closures may seem to make sense to an able-bodied, tech-savvy man. To many others they can be the difference between travelling or not and can provide essential advice, guidance and a place of safety.

@StuartRead (Dec 6, 2022)

RMT
@RMTUnion

The ticket office closure seems to make sense as we move to online, machine issued and contactless payments?

4:14 PM · Dec 6, 2022

143 Retweets 3 Quotes 730 Likes

#SupportRailWorkers

It’s not just a strike about pay, it’s also about Driver Only Operation. It’s also about the closure of all ticket offices. It’s also about removing 50% of all maintenance tasks. Those elements have all been insisted upon by the Government.

@MarkFlaxman-Binns (Dec 10, 2022)

RMT
@RMTUnion

As you won’t put the offer to the Membership, that tells us everything! It’s no longer a strike for pay, but an attempt by a Union run by Manics, to bring down an elected Government! People would respect you more if you actually admitted that! 😞⋯ 😞⋯

9:34 AM · Dec 10, 2022

296 Retweets 12 Quotes 1,073 Likes

#KeepTheGuardOnTheTrain
Impact of the case study

• RMT engaging in outreach beyond their members
  • How broad is their audience?
  • Have they changed public opinion?
• Encouraging people to join a union
  • In July there was an 184% increase in online searches
  • Evidence of people joining Unite, RMT, CWU & UCU
What’s next?

- Interviews with
  - ‘Twitter bloke’
  - Union leaders
  - Comms teams
  - Regional representatives

- Decide what theoretical framework to use (suggestions welcome!)
  - Mobilization theory
  - Social identity theory
  - Collective action (Bennett & Segerberg)
Contact us

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