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Industrial Action Media Analysis

August 2023



Executive Summary

Over the past 15 months unions across the public sector have participated in extended industrial action, in efforts to improve pay and working conditions. It is reported that 2.4 million working days were lost in the last six months of 2022; [79% of this](#) came from workers in transport, storage, information and communications. When striking has created school closures, 28% of parents [said they couldn't work](#), while 31% say they [worked fewer hours](#). Further, 15% of private businesses say they have suffered significant losses due to strike action – Pret a Manger was highlighted in the [Office for National Statistics \(ONS\) study](#) as an example of a strongly impacted company, as stores are often located in transport stations.

If demands are not met, the worst could be yet to come – the British Medical Association (BMA) announced a five-day walkout ahead of July 2023, which will be [the longest](#) in healthcare history for the UK. The Vuelio Insights team analysed all strike-related national online media coverage from **1 May 2022 – 11 August 2023**. The strike types measured were rail, education, air, healthcare and Royal Mail.

Close analysis throughout this period has allowed us to identify inflection points in the story, where events or comments redirected the media narrative on industrial action. By tracking these inflection points, Vuelio has identified the following key takeaways:

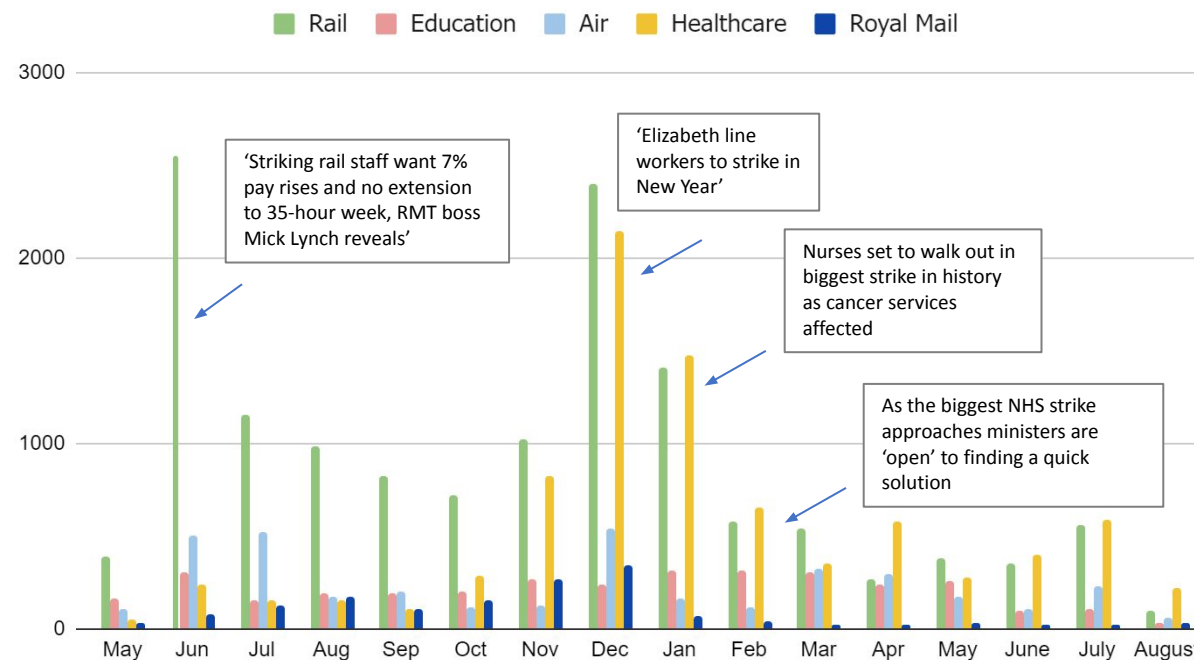
- Compared to other strike types, rail has consistently produced the largest volume of coverage and is also the most polarised media discussion throughout the study period.
- Education coverage has only been 5% positive, where media publications actively supported unions in the need to fix labour shortages.
- Royal Mail coverage was the most public-orientated, in that news was most often related to how postage strikes would affect specific holidays throughout the 15 months.
- Healthcare had the lowest ratio of positive coverage and the highest ratio of negative coverage compared to any other strike type.
- Over the study period, pay settlements has been the leading article theme across all strike types. While it has been mostly neutral in the press, pay settlements has also been the biggest driver of positive coverage. Negative coverage was mostly driven by general strike ballot announcements, which often mentioned a rail union/organisation in the headline.
- TSSA was the most-mentioned union within all positive media discussion, despite having low share of voice compared to competitors. Even though TSSA didn't stand out from the crowd in its overall share of voice, General-Secretary Frank Ward was the third-most quoted spokesperson over time.
- The most-quoted was Mick Lynch, who was quoted in 22% of all national rail strike coverage.
- Whereas Lynch was positioned as supportive of the public last year, the national media perspective has shifted to a much more pessimistic outlook as 2023 has progressed.

Industrial action media trends

May 2022 – Aug 2023: Compared to other strike types, rail has consistently produced the largest volume of national online news coverage. When industrial action was most discussed in the press (June, Dec & Jan), healthcare also attracted similarly strong media awareness. Healthcare briefly took the lead in February when the [‘biggest NHS strike in history’](#) was announced, and again in July when Scottish junior doctors called off strikes following the acceptance of a [12.4% pay rise](#). However, air and education strikes led the conversation more often during quieter months.

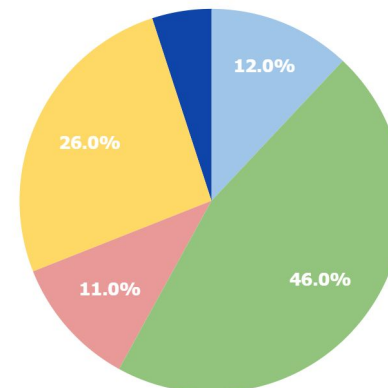
Rail generated the strongest media discussion around industrial action plans in June 2022, where 63% of coverage was political in nature. The most syndicated and high-reaching story of the period was [due to conflict](#) regarding Labour MPs, who backed rail strikes, receiving ‘thousands of pounds from hard-left RMT rail union’. RMT (National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers) had the highest share of voice among all unions across all coverage, but actually had a much lower representation of rail coverage (63%) when compared to CWU’s (Communication Workers’ Union) share of Royal Mail coverage (92%).

Strike type over time



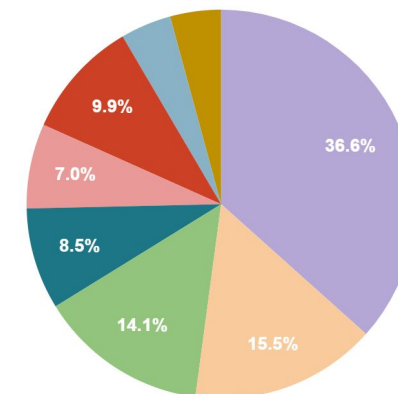
Strike type split

- Air
- Rail
- Education
- Healthcare
- Royal Mail

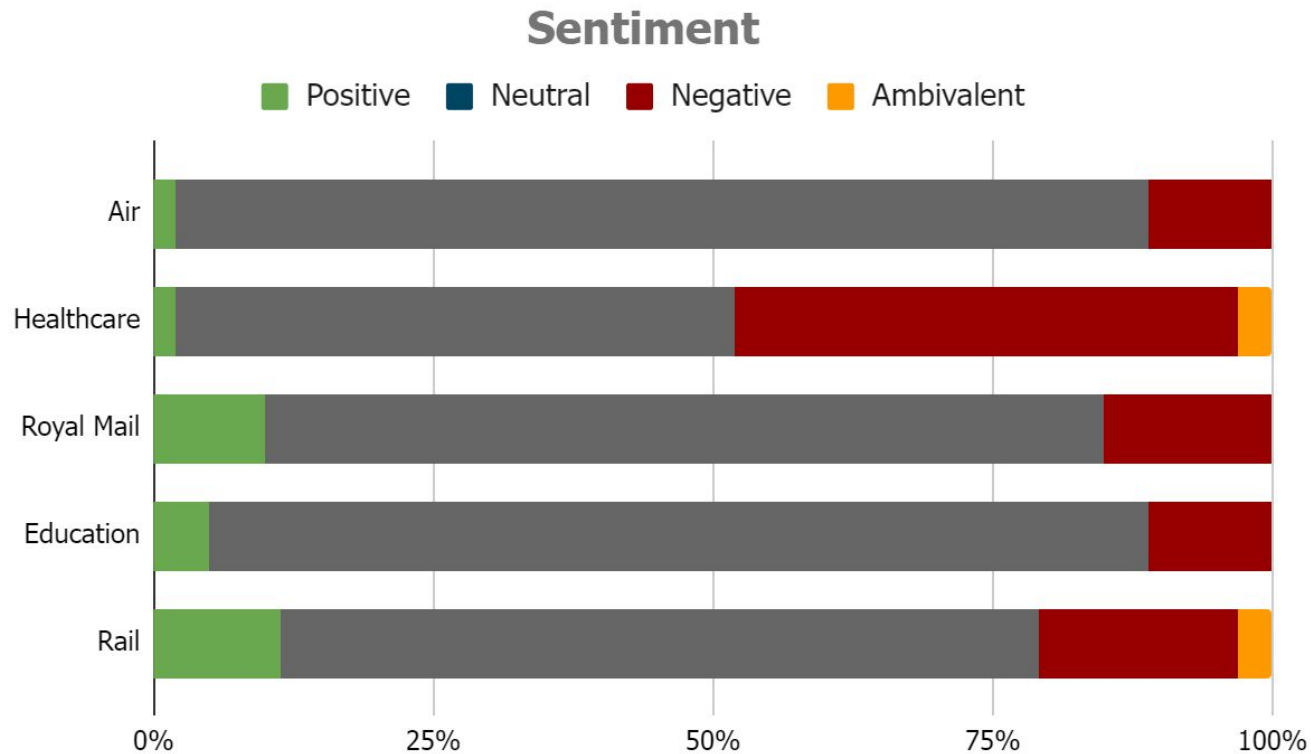


Union SOV

- RMT
- ASLEF
- Unison
- TSSA
- CWU
- NEU
- NASUWT
- EIS



Media Response to Industrial Action



Rail has created the most polarised conversation in the press over the past 15 months. Approximately 11% of coverage was positive, where pay settlements were the leading topic. Interestingly, headline prominence of rail organisations and/or unions was closely tied to positive coverage; 98% of positive headlines named a rail organisation and/or union, e.g., ‘Merseyrail staff accept sensible 7% pay offer’. 65% of coverage was neutral, which mostly regarded strike ballot announcements, while labour shortages and rejected pay offers drove the 17% negative and 3% ambivalent coverage.

Education coverage has only been 5% positive, in which media publications actively supported unions in the need to fix labour shortages. Most of the negative coverage focused on school strikes in Scotland, which peaked when EIS announced it’s ‘20-day rolling strike’ in February this year. Unlike any other strike type, Education had a significant portion of coverage tied to the pandemic—the most prominent headline being about Nadhim Zahawi, who called teachers ‘unforgivable’ for striking so shortly after lockdown.

Royal Mail coverage was often related to how postage strikes would affect specific holidays throughout the year. Positive coverage peaked in January when delayed Christmas deliveries started arriving at homes around the UK, whereas over 80% of neutral coverage was tied to general strike ballots and also mentioned other strike types within the coverage, i.e., ‘Nurses, trains and Royal Mail: Every strike up to Christmas’. Negative coverage peaked between 1st–8th November, due to the ‘threat’ of no Christmas post due to a pay offer rejection by CWU.

Healthcare had the lowest ratio of positive coverage and the highest ratio of negative coverage compared to any other strike type. The most-discussed positive story peaked between 2nd–5th March 2023 when it was announced that NHS leaders will ‘welcome’ Government plans for talks with all health unions. On the other hand, the most negative story peaked in December when nurses announced the ‘biggest strike in NHS history’, where 86% of articles mentioned affected cancer services.

Air strikes had similarly low positive coverage to healthcare, but the highest ratio of neutral coverage overall. This is likely because 62% of all air strike coverage focused on public disruption and headlines were highly generalised, e.g., ‘Heathrow cancelled flights: What you need to know’.

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Case Study: Rail Coverage

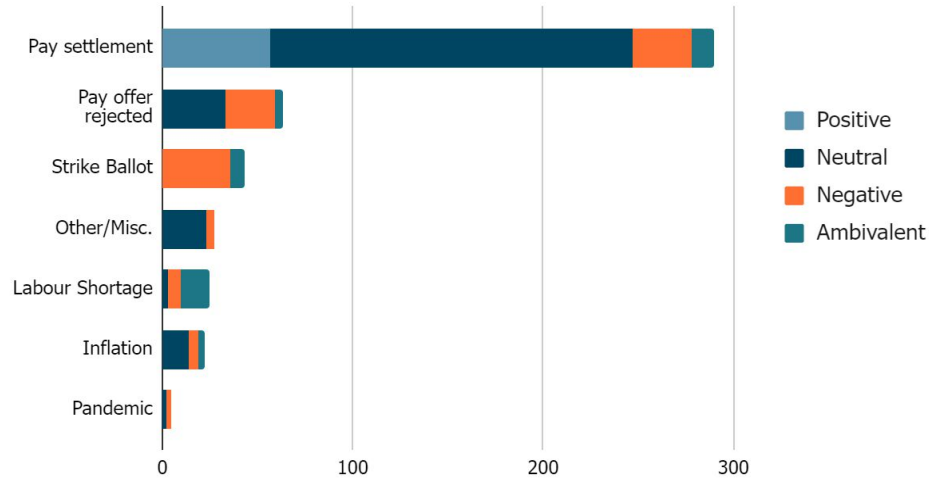
May 2022 – August 2023



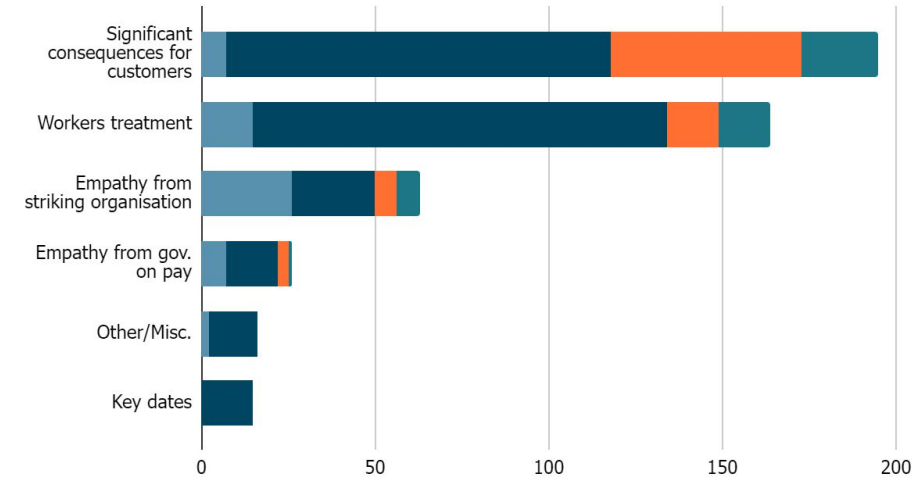
Messaging in the Media

As the leading strike type, the next section focuses specifically on rail and how it has performed in the UK media from **1 May 2022 – 11 August 2023**.

Article Themes



Key Messages



- Over the study period, **pay settlements** has been the leading article theme.
- While it has been mostly neutral in the press, **pay settlements** has also been the biggest driver of positive coverage. TSSA was the most-mentioned union within positive media discussion, despite having low share of voice overall. This was likely due to the fact that TSSA were one of the first major unions to accept a pay offer in 2023. As a result, between 23 Feb – 1 Mar, 49% of relevant coverage pushed other unions to follow suit by stating that ‘the pressure is on for RMT/ASLEF’ and alike in [headlines](#) and articles.
- Negative coverage was mostly driven by general **strike ballot** announcements, which often mentioned a rail union/organisation in the headline. When measuring crisis, higher volumes of neutral coverage are more beneficial to a brand than a regular campaign – more neutral coverage means less negative impact on brand reputation.
- **Labour shortages** was the most ambivalent article theme, largely due to the media being sympathetic to the reasons for rail shortages but critical of how this affects the public.

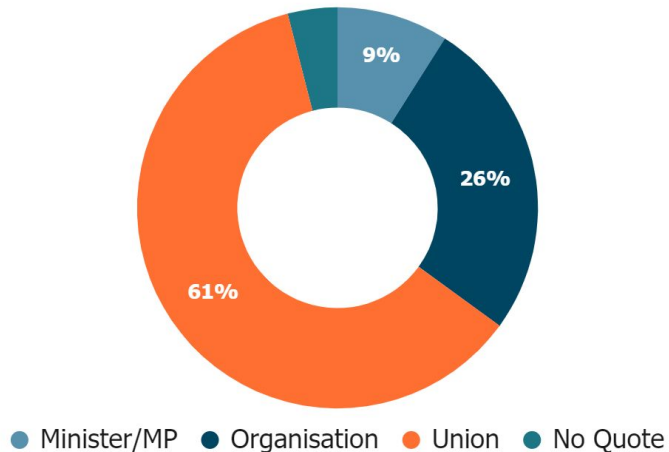
- **Significant consequences** for customers has been the leading message within rail coverage over the period; for example, how strikes have affected [parents](#) or [cancer patients](#). On 8 June, British TV hosts Carole Malone and Richard Madeley both made headlines under this message. Speaking on separate shows, Good Morning Britain and Jeremy Vine on 5, Malone ‘[slammed](#)’ RMT strikers, saying they’re ‘going to clobber working people’, while Madeley ‘[blasted](#)’ RMT Secretary-General, Mick Lynch, by calling him ‘completely unapologetic’ for ‘holding the public hostage’.
- **Workers Treatment** was mostly discussed in a neutral manner by national publications. This is likely because, with only 11% headline mentions being about workers treatment, it was much less prominent as a reason for striking than pay conditions.
- Coverage with **empathy from the striking organisation** towards the public was almost double the coverage with **empathy from the government**. Mick Lynch led this discussion i.e., stating he ‘[does not want public disruption](#)’ and that the ‘[chaos](#)’ should end as soon as possible.

Executive Impact in the Media

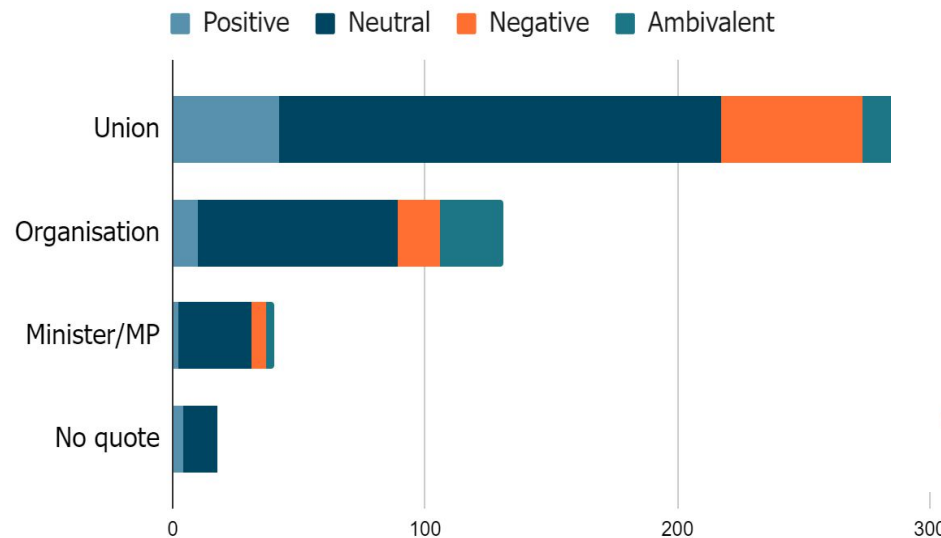
Throughout the study period, 96% of rail strike coverage across British media outlets featured a quote, with over half (61%) coming from a union spokesperson. The most-quoted was Mick Lynch, who was quoted in 22% of all national rail strike coverage—plus an additional 6% from Michael Hogg, RMT organiser for Scotland. In our research sample of quoted coverage, the overarching sentiment across all quote types was neutral. Articles with quotes from a union spokesperson were the most positive, whereas those from an organisation were slightly more ambivalent.

Even though TSSA didn't stand out from the crowd in its overall share of voice, General-Secretary Frank Ward was the third-most quoted spokesperson of the year. Phil Campbell, Head of Customer Operations at Scotrail, produced 9% more positive coverage than any other spokesperson—the leading story behind this being ['Scotrail agrees 5% pay deal with ASLEF'](#) between 8 – 12 June 2022. Campbell was also found criticising RMT for rejecting a 'similar offer' in this coverage, calling it 'astonishing' that members didn't have a say on the decision and that 'any staff share frustration' with RMT.

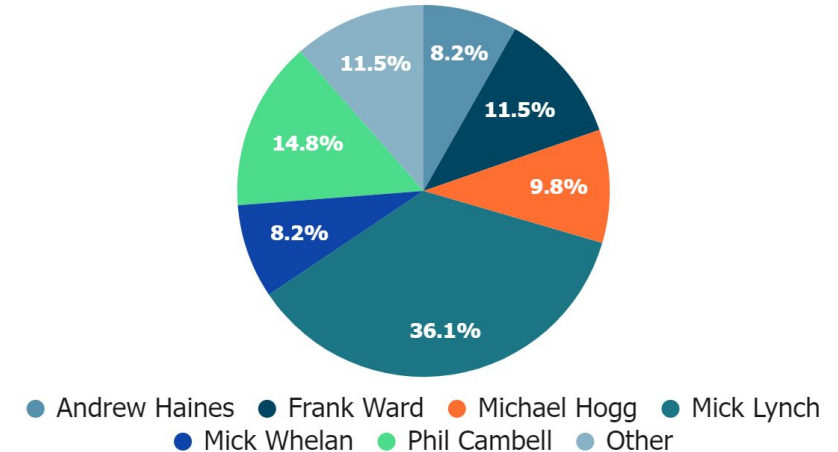
% of rail coverage with quote



Quoted vs. unquoted coverage



Key rail spokespeople



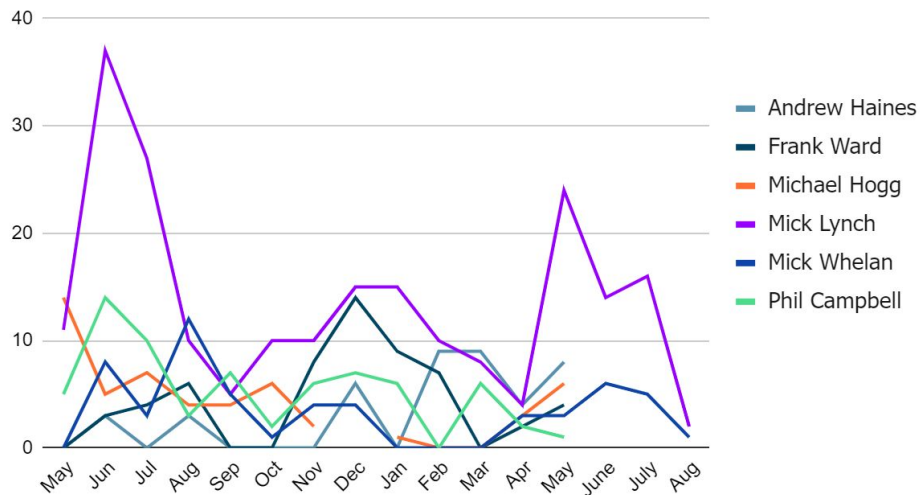
*Quote-related research is based on a sample of the top 1,000 rail strike articles across UK national news outlets between May 2022 – May 2023.

*Vuelio research found 19 rail spokespeople were quoted in UK press throughout the study period. This chart highlights those with a coverage volume higher than 5%.

Focus page: Mick Lynch

As the most-quoted speaker throughout the study period, this section focuses specifically on Mick Lynch and how such coverage has performed in the UK media throughout the study period.

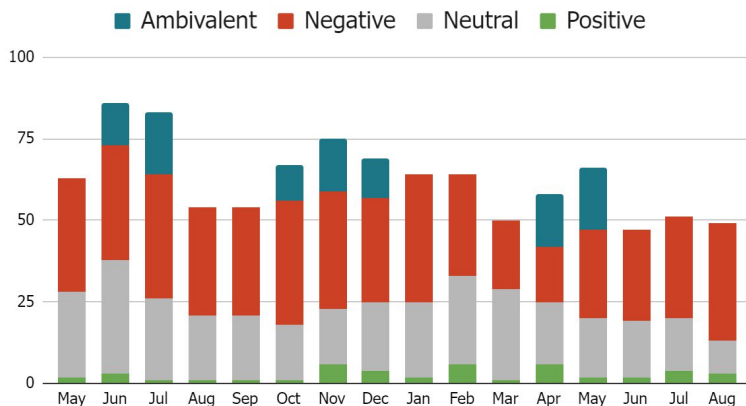
Coverage over time



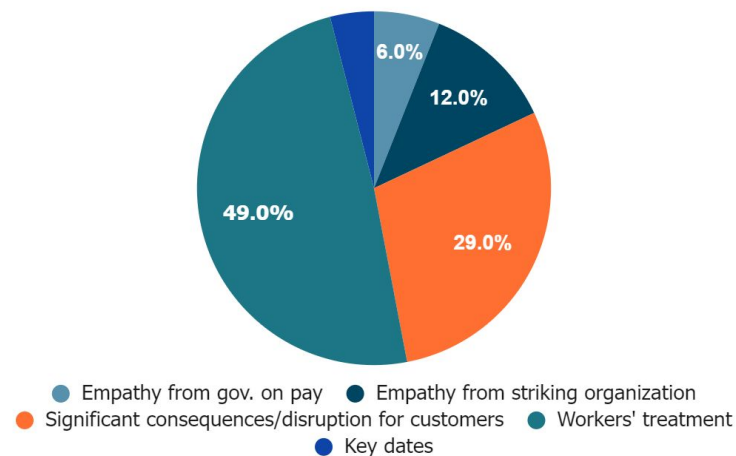
While Lynch was quoted in the most coverage overall, much of this was between the months of May and July in 2022 – after this period, it was marginally higher than other rail spokespeople. However, coverage has peaked to a similarly high degree again in May of this year, due to strikes affecting several major British events. Between 2 May–20 June, 438 articles across print and broadcast media positioned Lynch as [‘targeting’](#) Glastonbury, Eurovision and several national sporting events. This debate also led to several high-profile interviews on Good Morning Britain and other major talk shows, but any denial or response to the claims has been met with further [criticism](#). Negative coverage has increased by 52% following this debate, however, sentiment has been mostly neutral throughout the study period.

Broadcast was also the dominant media type during the negative peak last August, when Lynch referred to journalists and ‘the state of media’ as [‘dopey’](#) and ‘unaware of what trade unions are’. Lynch chose to comment on workers’ treatment in almost half of all coverage, from a [critical perspective](#) of how the government are communicating with rail staff in pay negotiations. This message peaked between June – July last year and has declined since. Interestingly, this was also the period that Lynch began stating that the public are [‘highly supportive’](#), a claim which remained present in quoted coverage for a further six months. In August, The Guardian backed this statement when it [reported](#) on a poll that 70% of Brits were pro-strike. However, in January of this year, Daily Mail [reported](#) a new poll claiming that this support is ‘starting to slip, despite Lynch [reporting](#) on ‘massive support from people online, in person, on our picket lines’ to Sky News.

Sentiment of coverage



Key Messages



*Quote-related research is based on a sample of the top 1,000 rail strike articles across UK national news outlets between 1 May 2022 – 11 August 2023.

Shifting Tides on Industrial Action

The analysis of industrial action reported in the UK between May 2022 and Aug 2023 sheds light on several significant shifts in media perspective. Rail and healthcare have been treated as a higher priority compared to other strike types, education fell in the mid-ground, whereas air and postal services tended to peak in seasons where the public would be most affected.

The portrayal of industrial action as a whole continues to project a pessimistic tone across the UK media landscape. Since June, there has been a growing trend of unions saying they are [‘not going away’](#) and will go on [‘for as long as it takes’](#), exemplified in recent reports of [‘record-breaking’](#) walkouts that are the [‘longest in history’](#) across healthcare and education sectors over the past few months. Since July, the debate has risen in the press over whether unions like BMA actually have [‘political motivations’](#) for such persistence.

While the [acceptance of a 12.4% pay rise](#) for Scottish junior doctors was a major story in July, it appears to be swept under the rug in comparison to the ‘persistence’ perspective. Rather, more emphasis has been placed on consultants planning strikes in the Autumn, pitching it as [‘more chaotic’](#) than junior doctors.

Tides are also shifting on how the media perceives public support of industrial action. Whereas the first half of the study saw extensive reporting on pro-strike Britain, the opposite is now the case. Since January, national publications have focused on how support is [‘slipping’](#) for both [healthcare](#)

and [rail strikes](#). Much like BMA, this change in perspective has directly affected the reputation and reliability of Mick Lynch and the RMT union, who has spoken of how Brits are [‘right behind’](#) rail strikes since they began early last year.

The UK media’s view on public support shifted to a negative one between March–May 2023, around the time that rail were accused of [‘targeting’](#) specific events and intentionally striking when Brits are most reliant on public transport. Alongside, several broadcast interviews on how continued strikes [will affect the working people](#) and parents long term contributed to Lynch’s newfound negative persona in the press.

While progress has been made largely through pay offers, national newspapers appear to be more interested in talking with key spokespeople what is pushing unions to continue. While political motives are denied in the healthcare sector, education unions had a different perspective. Since January, [op-eds](#) and political journalists have been exploring how teachers are not just striking for pay, but the poor treatment of vulnerable pupils, who have been [‘denied essential resources’](#) by the Conservative Government’. On 31 July 2023, it was announced that all four teaching unions in England had ended strike action – however, 82% of headlines focused only on the [6.5% pay rise](#) and did not mention the aforementioned needs of vulnerable students.

It is possible that the media will continue using the space between strikes to explore deeper issues behind industrial action, such as and [staff shortages](#) and welfare. When milestones are met, headlines across rail and education have persistently opted for the economic or political lens; therefore a likely perspective to be applied to the healthcare sector as it starts making similar gains.

Key Facts of the Study

Subject This study analyses the impact of industrial action across rail, postal services, education, air and healthcare. The research provided outlines how strikes have been perceived in the UK media landscape, looking at key online news publications to identify specific trends, stories and spokespeople. Political and social input is also applied intermittently throughout.

Period 1 May 2022 – 11 August 2023

Market UK Only

Media Online

Notes A sample of coverage was used when gathering data related to quoted coverage. The final sample was representative of the top 1,000 articles throughout the study period, measured by overall relevance and reliability of publications.