

Article

Labour disputes in the UK: 2018

Analysis of UK labour disputes in 2018, including working days lost, stoppages and workers involved.



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1 . Main points for 2018

- There were 273,000 working days lost due to labour disputes, the sixth-lowest annual total since records began in 1891.
- The education sector accounted for 66% of all working days lost, due mainly to disputes involving employees of universities.
- The number of working days lost in the public sector (26,000) was the lowest since records for public sector strikes began in 1996.
- There were 39,000 workers involved in labour disputes, the second-lowest figure since records for workers involved began in 1893.
- There were 81 stoppages, the second-lowest figure since records for stoppages began in 1930.

2 . Annual changes

A comparison of labour disputes in 2017 and 2018 is shown in Table 1. There are three core components to the figures: the number of working days lost through stoppages, the number of workers involved in those stoppages and the number of stoppages themselves. See Section 11 of this article for more details on these definitions.

Table 1 : Number of working days lost (WDL), workers involved and stoppages, UK, 2017 and 2018 in progress in year

	2017	2018
Working days lost through stoppages:	276,000	273,000
Workers involved in stoppages:	33,000	39,000
Stoppages:	79	81
Mean number of WDL per stoppage	3,499	3,367
Median number of WDL per stoppage	345	400

Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes

1. Workers in progress figures also include workers who did not strike initially but who joined at a later date. [Back to table](#)
2. WDL equals working days lost. [Back to table](#)

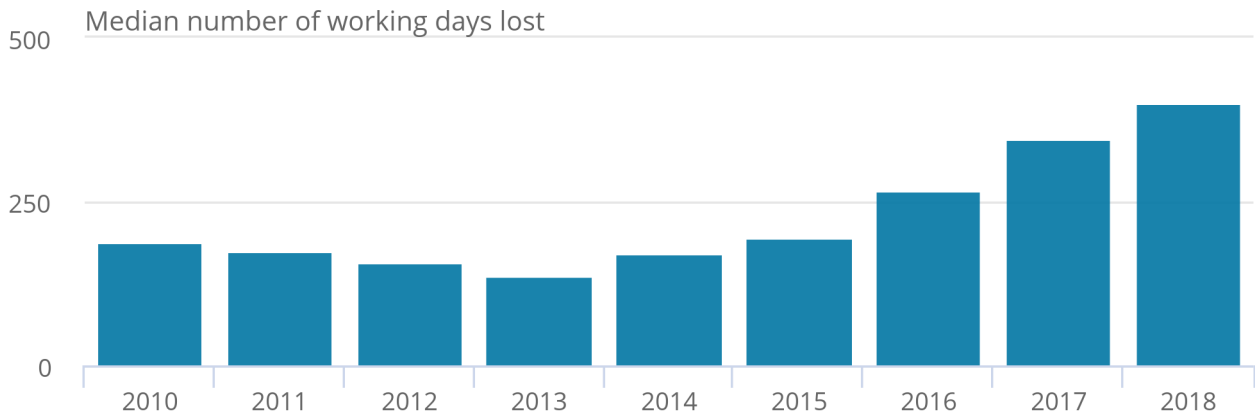
Information on earlier years is available in [Dataset Table 1: labour disputes annual estimates, 1891 to 2018](#).

Figure 1: The median number of working days lost per stoppage has increased for the last five years

Median working days lost per stoppage, UK, 2010 to 2018

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Median working days lost per stoppage, UK, 2010 to 2018



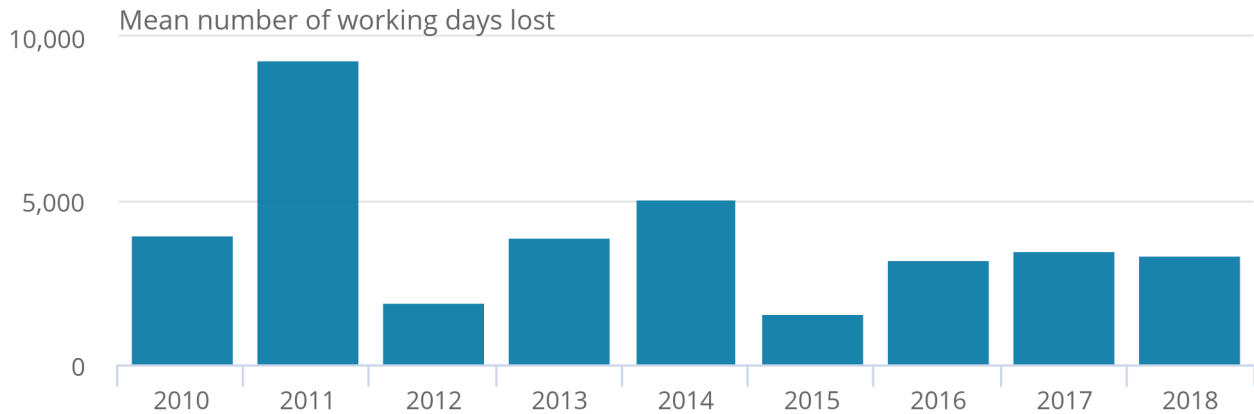
Source: Office for National Statistics

Figure 2: The mean number of working days lost per stoppage has been broadly flat for the last three years

Mean working days lost per stoppage, UK, 2010 to 2018

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Mean working days lost per stoppage, UK, 2010 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics

The mean number of working days lost per stoppage was slightly lower in 2018 than in 2017 but the median number was higher. The mean value is generally much higher than the median, because working days lost can be greatly affected by large one-off strikes. For this reason, the median tends to give a more typical measure of the average number of working days lost per stoppage.

3 . Historical context

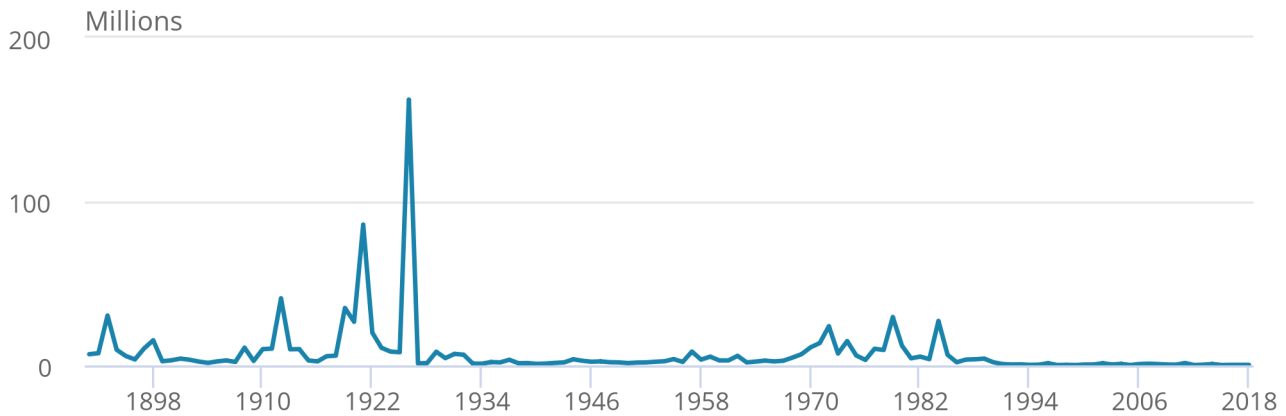
As shown in Figure 3, the amount of industrial action has significantly reduced since the early 1990s. This is a stark contrast to the level of action seen when the miners went on strike in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1910s and 1920s saw even greater levels of industrial action culminating in the general strike of 1926.

Figure 3: The highest number of working days lost in the UK was in 1926, the year of the general strike

Working days lost, UK, 1891 to 2018

Figure 3: The highest number of working days lost in the UK was in 1926, the year of the general strike

Working days lost, UK, 1891 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. 1898 – Welsh coal strike.
2. 1912 – National coal strike.
3. 1919 – Battle of George Square. Dispute over hours in a working week involving the shipbuilding and engineering trades.
4. 1921 – Black Friday.
5. 1926 – General Strike. Lasted nine days. Over 1.5 million coal miners, dockworkers, iron workers, printers, railwaymen, steelworkers and other transport workers joined the strike.
6. 1972 – UK miners' strike.
7. 1979 – Winter of discontent.
8. 1984 to 1985 – UK miners' strike.

The highest annual total for working days lost on record was 162.2 million in 1926, the year of the general strike. Since 1926, there have only been three years when the annual total of working days lost has exceeded 20 million:

- 23.9 million in 1972, due mainly to a strike by coal miners
- 29.5 million in 1979, due mainly to the so-called “winter of discontent” (a number of strikes in the public sector in the winter of 1978 to 1979)
- 27.1 million in 1984, due mainly to a strike by coal miners

Since 2000, the highest annual total of working days lost was 1.4 million in 2011, due mainly to two large public sector strikes.

Table 2 presents labour disputes figures for the period 1999 to 2018. Of the 273,000 working days lost in 2018, 61% came from a single stoppage involving university employees. The next-largest stoppage in 2018, in terms of working days lost, accounted for only 7% of the total.

Table 2: Number of working days lost and stoppages, UK, 1999 to 2018

Year	Working days lost (thousands)	Working days lost per 1,000 employees ²	Workers involved (thousands)	Stoppages ³	Stoppages involving the loss of 100,000 working days or more
1999	242	9	141	205	-
2000	499	19	183	212	1
2001	525	20	180	194	1
2002	1,323	49	943	146	2
2003	499	18	151	133	-
2004	905	33	293	130	3
2005	157	6	93	116	-
2006	755	27	713	158	1
2007	1,039	37	745	142	4
2008	759	27	511	144	2
2009	455	16	209	98	1
2010	365	13	133	92	1
2011	1,390	51	1,530	149	3
2012	249	9	237	131	1
2013	444	16	395	114	2
2014	788	27	733	155	2
2015	170	6	81	106	-
2016	322	11	154	101	1
2017	276	9	33	79	1
2018	273	9	39	81	1

Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes

1. Cells containing a hyphen (-) represent zero. [Back to table](#)
2. Based on the estimates of employee jobs from Workforce Jobs (ONS). [Back to table](#)
3. Stoppages in progress during year. Prior to 2015 a dispute was counted as a new stoppage if there was a gap of more than one month between instances of industrial action. From 2015 disputes with a gap of more than one month between instances of industrial action are counted as a single stoppage. [Back to table](#)

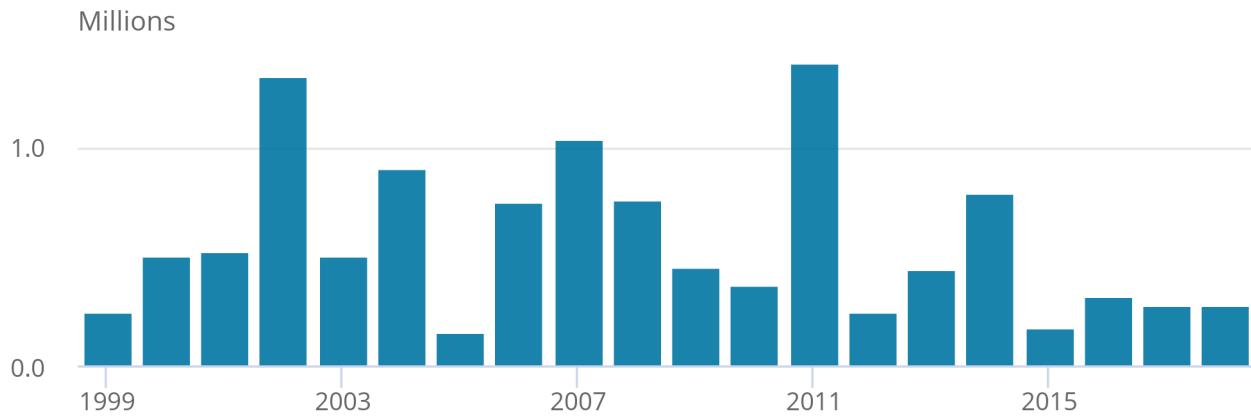
The second column of Table 2 shows working days lost per 1,000 employee jobs for each year from 1999 to 2018. This enables comparisons to be made adjusting for employment changes over time. The 273,000 working days lost in 2018 is equivalent to nine working days lost per 1,000 employees, which is lower than the average over the last 20 years.

Figure 4: The highest number of working days lost in the past 20 years was 1.39 million in 2011

Working days lost, UK, 1999 to 2018

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Working days lost, UK, 1999 to 2018



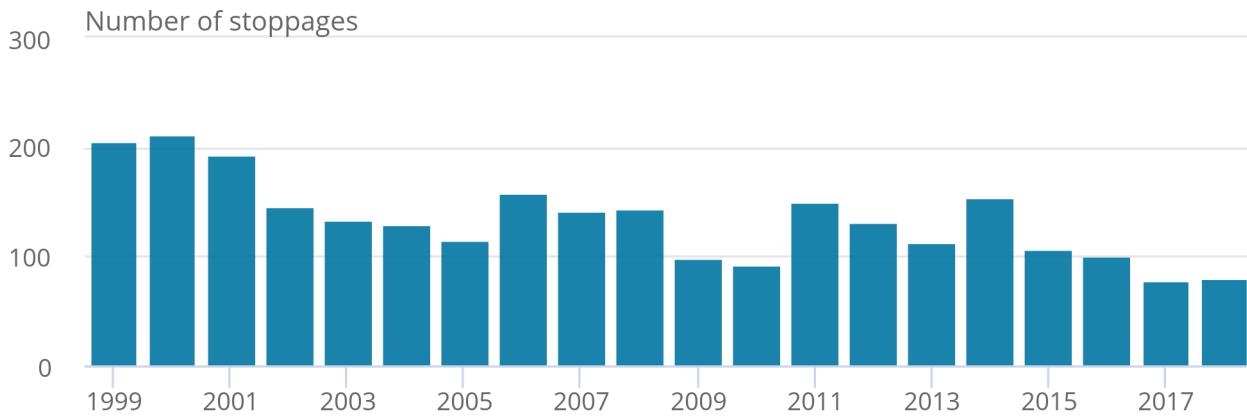
Source: Office for National Statistics

Figure 5: The highest number of stoppages in the past 20 years was 212 in 2000

Stoppages, UK, 1999 to 2018

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Stoppages, UK, 1999 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics

Figures 4 and 5 illustrate working days lost and the number of stoppages respectively for the last 20 years. They show that there are a number of spikes in the time series in years when a particularly large strike took place, showing the impact individual strikes can have on the statistics. The high number of days lost in 2011, for example, was due to two large public sector strikes, while the 2002 figure was due to one very large stoppage in the transport and storage industry.

As shown in Figure 5, there has generally been a decline in the number of strikes since 1999. Though volatile, the number of working days lost has remained broadly the same over this period. This shows that although the number of stoppages has fallen, large-scale stoppages have become more common.

A longer time series showing stoppages and working days lost can be found within [Dataset Table 1](#).

4 . Industrial analyses

Table 3 shows labour disputes statistics for 2018 broken down into 13 industry groups, classified according to the Standard Industrial Classification 2007: SIC 2007. The largest sector, in terms of working days lost and workers involved was education, which accounted for:

- 66% of all working days lost (179,000 out of a total of 273,000)
- 52% of all workers involved (20,000 out of a total of 39,000)
- 21% of all strikes (17 out of 81)

While the education sector accounted for most of the working days lost and workers involved in 2018, the sector showing the largest number of stoppages was transport and storage (25 out of 81). The strikes in this sector mainly occurred within public transport.

Table 3: Number of working days lost and stoppages by industry, UK, 2018

Industry group (SIC 2007)	SIC class	Working days lost (thousands)	Working days lost per 1,000 employees	Workers involved (thousands)	Stoppages ³
All industries and services		272.7	9	39.2	81
Agriculture forestry and fishing	01,02,03	-	-	-	-
Mining, quarrying and Electricity, gas, air conditioning	5 to 9, 35	0.1	1	-	1
Manufacturing	10 to 33	3.0	1	0.6	5
Sewerage, Waste Management and Remediation Activities and Water Supply	36 to 39	4.6	21	0.9	4
Construction	41 to 43	5.8	4	0.8	3
Wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles, and Accommodation and Food Services	45 to 47, 55 to 56	0.9	-	0.3	6
Transport and storage	49 to 53	42.6	30	4.9	25
Information and Communication	58 to 63	10.6	8	0.5	2
Financial and Insurance, Real estate, Professional, Scientific, Technical and Admin Activities	64 to 82	4.0	1	0.7	5
Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	84	15.9	12	8.8	4
Education	85	179.4	67	20.3	17
Human Health and social work	86 to 88	4.9	1	1.2	6
Other	90 to 99	0.8	1	0.1	3

Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes

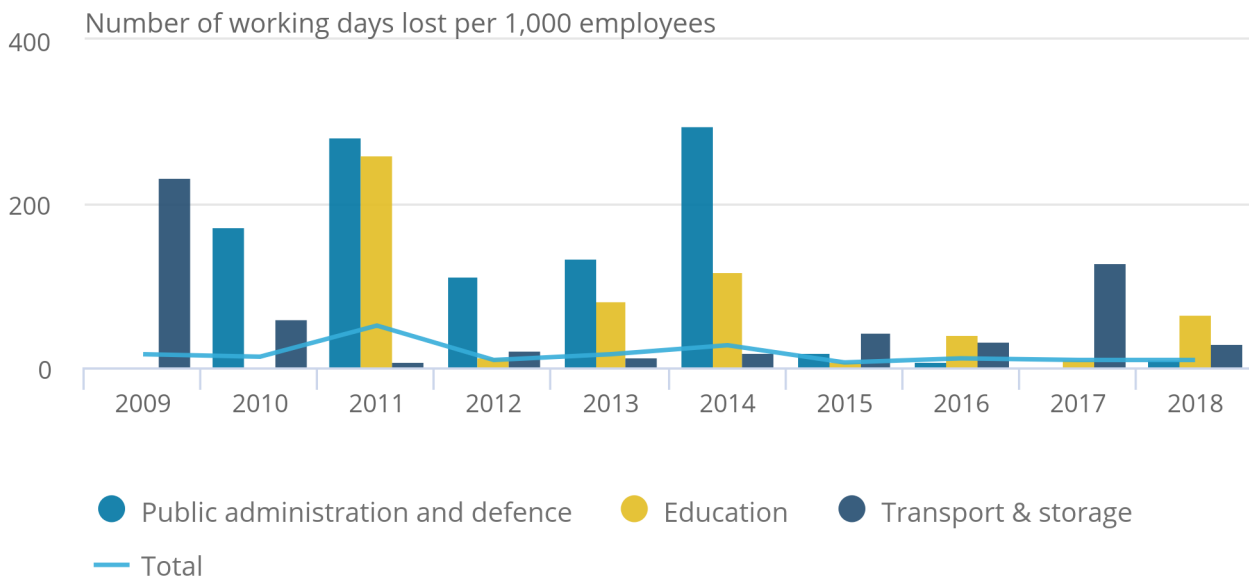
1. The figures for working days lost and workers have been rounded and consequently the sums of constituent items may not agree precisely with the totals. [Back to table](#)
2. Some stoppages involved workers in more than one of the above industry groups, but have each been counted as only one stoppage in the totals for all industries and services. Cells containing a hyphen (-) represent a zero or less than 50. [Back to table](#)
3. Stoppages in progress during year. [Back to table](#)

Figure 6: In 2018, the highest number of working days lost per 1,000 employees was in the education sector

Working days lost per 1,000 employees for selected industries, UK, 2009 to 2018

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Working days lost per 1,000 employees for selected industries, UK, 2009 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics

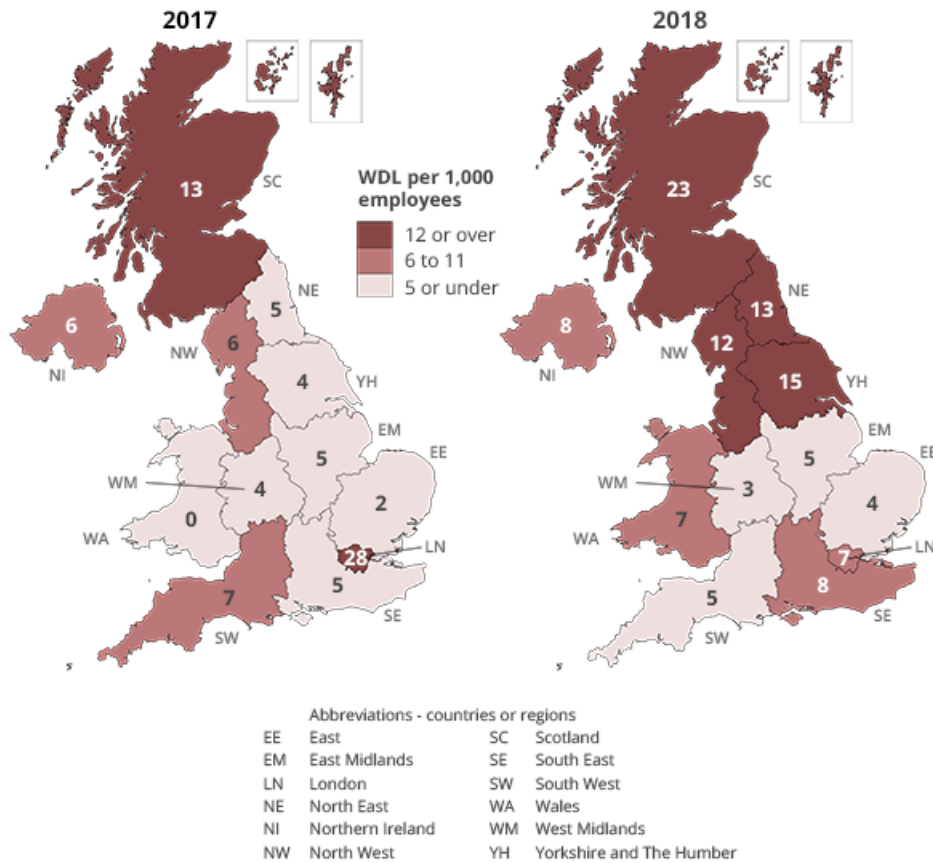
As shown in Figure 6, the highest number of working days lost in 2018 occurred in the education sector (67 working days lost per 1,000 employees), a contrast to 2017 when most working days lost occurred in the transport and storage sector.

5. Regional analysis

As shown in Figure 7, the region with the highest strike rate in 2018 was Scotland (23 working days lost per 1,000 employees). This contrasts with 2017, when the highest strike rate was in London (28 working days lost per 1,000 employees).

Figure 7: Scotland had the largest strike rate in 2018

Working days lost per 1,000 employees by country or region, UK, 2017 and 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.
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 Graphic created by GIS and Mapping Unit, ONS Geography

Looking at the figures over the 10-year period from 2009 to 2018:

- the highest strikes rates (22 working days lost per 1,000 employees) occurred in the North East and in Yorkshire and The Humber
- the lowest strike rate (seven working days lost per 1,000 employees) occurred in the East of England

[Dataset Table 2](#) shows regional strike rates between 2009 and 2018, with a further breakdown of the figures for 2018 by industrial grouping. When interpreting these figures, it is important to bear in mind that the industrial composition of employment in a region is a major influencing factor on the scale of labour disputes it experiences.

6 . Cause of disputes

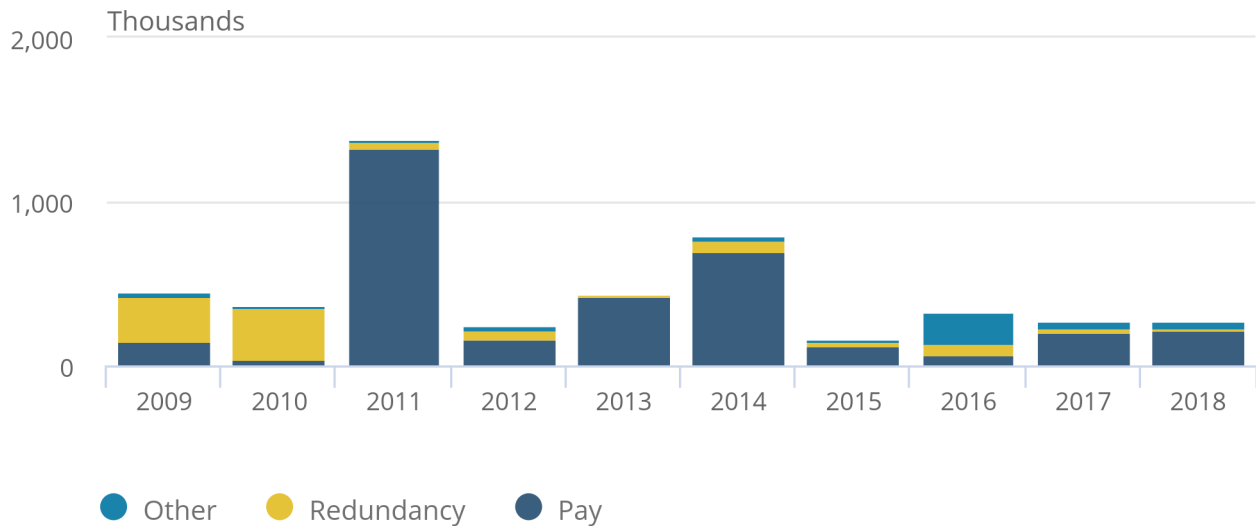
For 2009 and 2010, following the recession, redundancies were the main cause of disputes. However, since 2011, pay has been the main cause of disputes in all years except for 2016, when the main cause was duration and pattern of hours worked (shown within the “Other” category in Figure 8 and due mainly to a dispute involving junior doctors in the National Health Service in England).

Figure 8: Pay has been the main cause of labour disputes for the last two years

Working days lost by principal cause of dispute, UK, 2009 to 2018

Figure 8: Pay has been the main cause of labour disputes for the last two years

Working days lost by principal cause of dispute, UK, 2009 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics

In 2018, over half of the stoppages (50 out of a total of 81) were due to pay disputes and they accounted for:

- 225,200 working days lost (around 83% of all working days lost)
- 33,500 workers involved (around 85% of all workers involved)

[Dataset Table 3](#) shows stoppages in 2018 by principal cause and industry grouping. Disputes over pay also include stoppages over feared or alleged reductions in earnings, as well as disputes over the size of pay increases. Disputes over pension provisions are also classified as disputes over pay.

[Dataset Table 4](#) shows information on working days lost by cause of dispute in each year since 2009. The figures are often dominated by one or two very large strikes, which can make comparisons over time difficult.

7 . Disputes by duration

Labour disputes statistics cover the number of days that strike action took place, not the number of days the parties involved in the dispute were in disagreement.

Table 4 shows the duration of the 81 stoppages in progress in 2018. These show that 12 out of the 81 stoppages in 2018 lasted for only one day. While these one-day stoppages accounted for 14.8% of all stoppages, they only accounted for 2.2% of all workers involved and 0.3% of all working days lost in 2018.

Table 4: Working days lost, workers involved and stoppages in progress by duration, UK, 2018

Duration	Working days lost (thousands)	Proportion of all working days lost (%)	Workers involved (thousands)	Proportion of all workers (%)	Stoppages in progress	Proportion of all stoppages (%)
1	0.8	0.3	0.8	2.2	12	14.8
2	11.9	4.4	8.4	21.5	12	14.8
3	1.9	0.7	1.0	2.4	10	12.3
4	9.4	3.4	3.2	8.1	6	7.4
5	4.6	1.7	1.1	2.9	7	8.6
6 to 10	20.6	7.6	3.3	8.3	16	19.8
11 to 15	176.6	64.8	19.0	48.6	5	6.2
16 to 20	1.3	0.5	0.2	0.6	3	3.7
21 to 30	3.8	1.4	0.3	0.8	4	4.9
31 to 50	41.4	15.2	1.7	4.3	5	6.2
Over 50	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.3	1	1.2
All stoppages	272.7	100.0	39.2	100.0	81	100.0

Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes

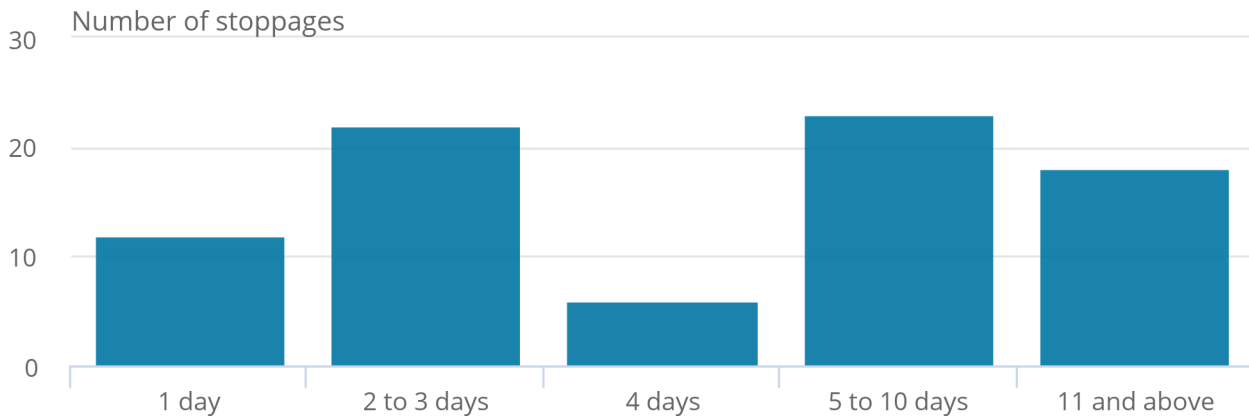
1. The statistics cover the number of days that strike action took place, not the number of days the parties involved in the dispute were actually in disagreement. [Back to table](#)
2. Classification by size is based on the full duration of stoppages, but the figure for days lost include only those days lost in 2018. [Back to table](#)
3. The figures for working days lost and workers involved have been rounded and consequently the sum of the constituent items may not agree precisely with the totals. [Back to table](#)
4. The working days lost figures are in general less than the product of the duration of each stoppage and the number of workers involved because some workers would not have been involved throughout the dispute – see the Technical note section for more information. [Back to table](#)
5. Cells containing a hyphen (-) represent a zero. [Back to table](#)

Figure 9: Just over half of the total number of stoppages in 2018 lasted for five days or more

Number of stoppages in progress by duration of dispute, UK, 2018

Figure 9: Just over half of the total number of stoppages in 2018 lasted for five days or more

Number of stoppages in progress by duration of dispute, UK, 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics

8 . Disputes by size

Table 5 shows disputes in 2018 by size. Of the 81 stoppages in 2018, over half (45) had less than 500 days lost. These stoppages with less than 500 days lost accounted for only 2.8% of all working days lost. Only two stoppages in 2018 had 25,000 or more days lost, but these two stoppages accounted for 68.6% of all working days lost. This shows the impact that large strikes can have on the figures.

Table 5: Stoppages in progress by size of dispute, UK, 2018

Working days lost in each dispute	Working days lost (thousands)	Proportion of all working days lost (%)	Workers involved (thousands)	Proportion of all workers (%)	Stoppages in progress	Proportion of all stoppages (%)
Under 250 days	3.7	1.4	2.4	6.0	36	44.4
250 and under 500	3.8	1.4	1.2	3.0	9	11.1
500 and under 1,000	8.7	3.2	1.9	4.7	13	16.0
1,000 and under 5,000	22.3	8.2	4.4	11.4	14	17.3
5,000 and under 25,000	47.3	17.3	11.0	28.2	7	8.6
25,000 days and over	186.9	68.6	18.3	46.7	2	2.5
All stoppages	272.7	100.0	39.2	100.0	81	100.0

Source: Office for National Statistics

Notes

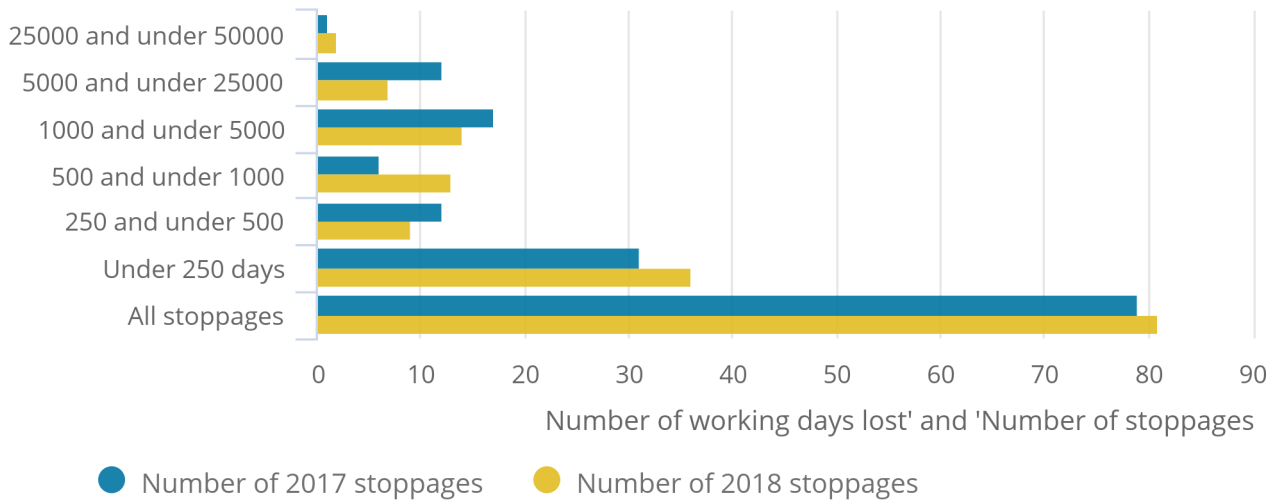
1. The figures for working days lost and workers involved have been rounded and consequently the sum of the constituent items may not agree with the totals. [Back to table](#)

Figure 10: Most stoppages in 2017 and 2018 had less than 500 working days lost

Number of stoppages in progress by working days lost, UK, 2017 and 2018

Figure 10: Most stoppages in 2017 and 2018 had less than 500 working days lost

Number of stoppages in progress by working days lost, UK, 2017 and 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics

9 . Disputes by public and private sector

While records for working days lost go back to 1891, the figures can only be broken down between the public and private sectors from 1996. Table 6 shows working days lost and number of stoppages for the private and public sectors for the last 10 years.

Table 6: Number of working days lost and stoppages by public and private sector, UK, 2009 to 2018

Year	Working days lost (thousands)		Stoppages ¹		Working days lost per 1000 employees ²	
	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private
2009	368	88	49	49	57	4
2010	313	52	47	45	49	2
2011	1,276	113	87	62	205	5
2012	198	51	62	69	33	2
2013	363	81	50	64	63	3
2014	716	72	68	87	129	3
2015	90	79	53	53	16	3
2016	243	79	41	60	44	3
2017	44	232	30	49	8	9
2018	26	246	25	56	5	9

Notes

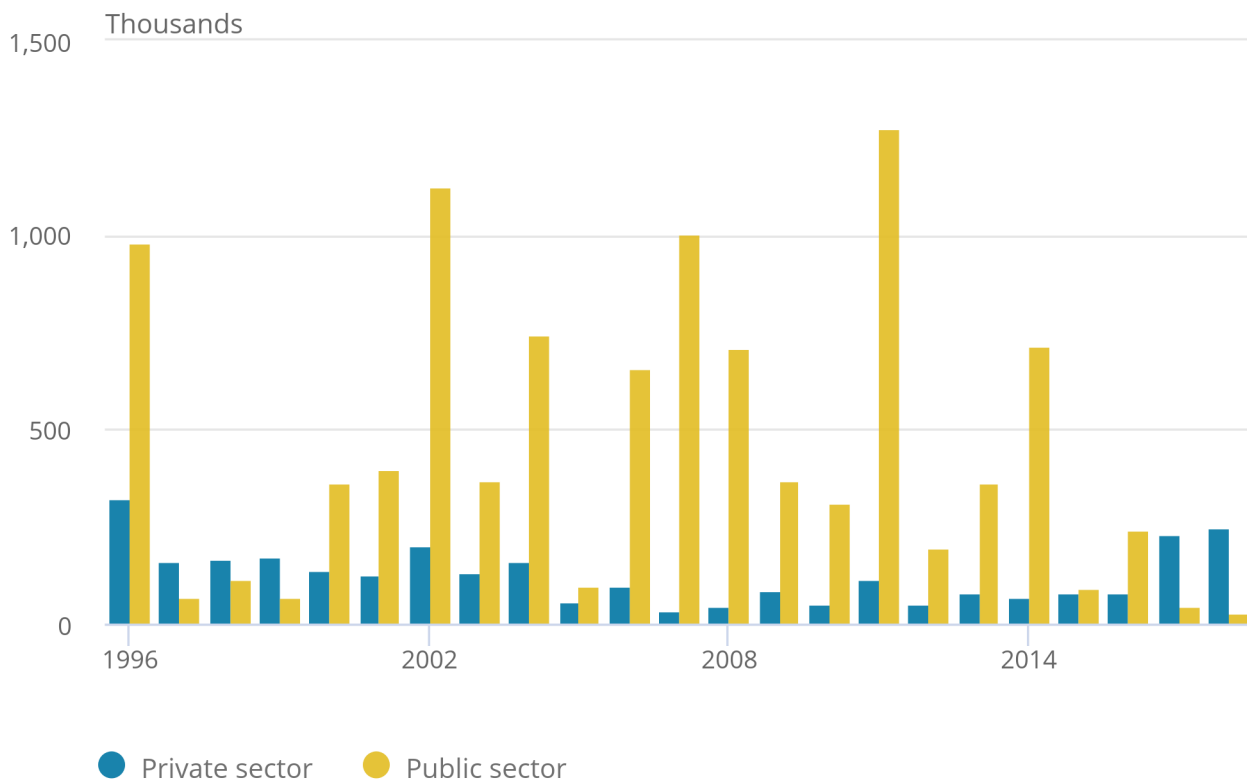
1. Stoppages in progress during the year. [Back to table](#)
2. Based on the latest estimates of public and private sector employment (Office for National Statistics). [Back to table](#)

Figure 11: In 2018, the number of working days lost in the public sector (26,000) was the lowest on record

Workings days lost by public and private sectors, UK, 1996 to 2018

Figure 11: In 2018, the number of working days lost in the public sector (26,000) was the lowest on record

Workings days lost by public and private sectors, UK, 1996 to 2018



Source: Office for National Statistics

As shown in Figure 11, for each year between 2000 and 2016 there were more working days lost in the public sector than in the private sector even though the private sector is much larger. However, for both 2017 and 2018, there were more working days lost in the private sector than in the public sector.

In 2018:

- the number of working days lost in the private sector (246,000) was the largest since 1996
- the number of working days lost in the public sector (26,000) was the lowest since records for public sector strikes began in 1996

10 . Quality and methodology

The [Labour disputes Quality and Methodology Information report](#) contains important information on:

- the strengths and limitations of the data and how it compares with related data
- uses and users
- how the output was created
- the quality of the output including the accuracy of the data

11 . Technical note

Definition of stoppages

The statistics cover stoppages of work in progress in the UK during a year caused by labour disputes between employers and workers, or between workers and other workers, connected with terms and conditions of employment. A distinction can be drawn between stoppages that started in the current year and those that started in earlier years.

A stoppage in progress is defined as a dispute that has continued from a previously recorded dispute by the same organisation and for the same cause. Prior to 2015, a dispute was counted as a new stoppage if there was a gap of more than one month between instances of industrial action. From 2015, disputes with a gap of more than one month between instances of industrial action are counted as a single stoppage.

The statistics exclude disputes that do not result in a stoppage of work, for example, work-to-rules and go-slows; this is because their effects are not quantifiable to any degree of certainty. Stoppages involving fewer than 10 workers or lasting less than one day are also excluded unless the total number of working days lost in the dispute is 100 or more.

Stoppages over issues not directly linked to terms and conditions between workers and employers are omitted, although in most years this is not significant. For example, in 1986 one stoppage was considered to be political (a protest in the coal industry against the visit of an MP) and it was excluded from the figures. The total working days lost amounted to less than 1,000. The next known dispute to be excluded was in 1991. This involved a boycott by self-employed market traders who, after increased rent and changes to the market rules, kept their stalls closed for about 20 weeks.

Working days lost

Working days lost are defined as the number of days not worked by people as a result of their involvement in a dispute at their place of work. In measuring the number of working days lost, account is taken only of the time lost in the basic working week. Overtime work is excluded, as is weekend working where it is not a regular practice.

Where an establishment is open every day, and runs two or more shifts, the statistics will record the number of working days lost for each shift. In recording the number of days lost, allowance is made for public and known annual holidays, such as factory fortnights, occurring within the strike's duration. No allowance is made for absence from work for such reasons as sickness and unauthorised leave.

Where strikes last less than the basic working day, the hours lost are converted to full-day equivalents. Similarly, days lost by part-time workers are converted to full-day equivalents. The number of working days lost in a stoppage reflects the actual number of workers involved at each point in the stoppage. This is generally less than the total derived by multiplying the duration of the stoppage by the total number of workers involved at any time during the stoppage, because some workers would not have been involved throughout.

Figures given for working days lost per 1,000 employees use employee jobs for each year taken from our most recent estimates of workforce jobs.

Number of stoppages

There are difficulties in ensuring complete recording of stoppages, in particular short disputes lasting only a day or involving only a few workers may be overlooked. Because of this recording difficulty and the cut-off applied, the number of working days lost is considered to be a better indicator of the impact of labour disputes than the number of recorded stoppages.

Workers involved

We aim to record the number of workers that are involved at any time in the stoppage. For example, consider a three-day strike where there were 200 workers involved on the first day; 300 on the second day, of whom 100 were involved for the first time; and 200 on the third day, of whom 50 were involved for the first time. The total number of workers involved in the dispute is 350 – the sum of all those involved on the first day, and those joining for the first time on subsequent days. However, the number of workers taking strike action for the first time during a dispute cannot always be easily ascertained. In such cases, the statistics record the highest number involved at any one time (300 in this example).

Take another example, where there are 200 workers involved in a stoppage on each of days one, two and three. It may be necessary to assume that there were a total of 200 workers involved, although it is possible, but unlikely, that as many as 600 workers could have been involved. For this reason, the statistics may underestimate the number of workers involved in a dispute. However, the estimate of the number of working days lost is unaffected by this consideration.