

Government readies military as UK tanker drivers vote to strike

Paul Stuart
30 March 2012

Two thousand tanker drivers at five major oil distribution companies have voted overwhelmingly to strike against sustained attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions.

With Turners, Norbert Dentressangle, Wincanton, BP and Hoyer targeted, up to 7,900 petrol stations are likely to be affected, including J. Sainsbury PLC, Tesco PLC, Asda Group Ltd, Esso and Royal Dutch Shell.

No strike date has been set by the Unite union.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition has responded by preparing a major strikebreaking operation involving 300 military tanker drivers and police squads to break up any blockades of oil refineries. One military base said to be on stand-by is Ashchurch Army Barracks, Gloucestershire, which was used in a previous strike-breaking operation.

Energy Secretary Ed Davey said he would take “whatever action” necessary to defeat a strike, including “emergency powers.”

Cabinet Office Minister Francis Maude said, “Although we are pushing for an agreement, we have learnt the lessons of the past and stand ready to act.”

The government is meeting with fuel delivery companies and supermarkets to plan their strategy, the BBC said.

Subcontracting of the distribution of petroleum products is leading to job cuts, the forcing down of wages and the undermining of working conditions. In January drivers employed by the transport specialist Wincanton to deliver fuel to 381 Jet forecourts took two seven-day strikes against demands for wage cuts of up to 20 percent. Workers at Coryton oil refinery confront the closure of the facility with the loss of 1,000 jobs.

Companies are cutting the time for deliveries and imposing fines on drivers for missing delivery

deadlines. Drivers are also face an attack on their pensions, with final salary pension schemes under sustained attack.

Jon Trickett, Labour’s shadow minister for the Cabinet Office, attacked the government for not showing “it understands the gravity of the current situation.” He called for a deal to be agreed, but insisted like his Tory counterpart, “It is essential that a strike is averted.”

Labour leaders Ed Miliband demanded a strike be averted “at all costs.” He was more confident a deal could be done to stop strikes with Unite, Labour’s biggest financial backer, donating millions of pounds every year, including £10,000 to his leadership election campaign.

One transport company, Norbert Dentressangle, made their intentions clear. When the ballot was announced on March 2, it sacked six tanker drivers in Grangemouth, Scotland, who deliver to Tesco supermarket forecourts, saying there was no work. According to Unite these were the only union members working on Norbert Dentressangle’s Tesco contract in Scotland who would have been balloted for strike action.

The proposed use of the military during a strike constitutes a major threat to democratic rights. Unite have not responded beyond expressing fears that military drivers might not have sufficient safety training. Even before the ballot was finished, Unite were backtracking. A union official was quoted as saying, “We want to avoid a strike and would prefer to sit down with the companies and discuss these issues.”

As soon as the ballot results were in, Assistant General Secretary Diana Holland told reporters the union still hoped to avoid action. Unite’s main demand has been for the creation of an industry-wide board of

standards and safety. They have played down the other questions facing workers. Holland told the press that the strike was only about safety, not about pay.

Last year the union established a new forum with employers to create industry-wide standards. They have clearly made some headway. Chris Kingshott, head of Wincanton, revealed that the company joined the forum in December. A Hoyer spokesman also stated, “We have been actively engaged in discussions with Unite through the Industry Forum to examine ways in which these high health safety and training stands can be applied across the industry.”

The union’s complaint now is that the employers’ “unrelenting attacks on drivers’ terms and conditions” have “thwarted” their “attempts to progress the forum.”

Maude claimed that Unite was determined to bring the government to its knees. On the contrary, Len McCluskey, Unite’s general secretary, said the union had “desperately” sought some stability and had been “urging government ministers to persuade contractors and oil companies to engage in meaningful discussions with us.”

As far as McCluskey is concerned, the strike ballot will be used only to get the contractors and oil companies “to respond.”

Unite national officer Matt Draper said that for over a year the union had tried to talk “some sense into this industry, but [employers] have shown no genuine interest in bringing stability to the supply of this vital national commodity.”

During the January strikes at Wincanton, Draper had demonstrated Unite’s willingness to offer the company a “number of concessions” to call off the strikes. The union refused to unite the dispute of Wincanton workers with workers at Coryton refinery.

Unite are now considering a proposal to put the dispute into ACAS, the government “conciliation” service which is used by government, employers and trade unions to overturn mandates for strike and impose employers’ diktats.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)