

Britain: Talks continue on possible tanker drivers strike

Paul Bond
24 April 2012

Talks aimed at preventing strikes by UK fuel tanker drivers are continuing today—the deadline for the Unite trade union on whether to take strike action.

Last week, Unite, representing more than 2,000 tanker drivers, rejected an undisclosed deal put forward by the oil companies. It made clear, however, that it wanted to avoid strike action at all costs.

The union said that last week's talks at the conciliation service ACAS showed a solution was "within reach". Diana Holland, Unite's assistant general secretary, stressed, "It is very clear that, at this point, we are not on strike, we have not announced that we are going on strike".

Recognising this, the employers themselves had agreed to an extension of Unite's strike mandate until today, while the ACAS negotiations were ongoing.

More than 2,000 tanker drivers at seven major oil companies voted for industrial action. Drivers at five companies—Turners, Norbert Dentressangle, Wincanton, BP, and Hoyer—voted overwhelmingly to strike against sustained attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions. Workers at DHL and JW Suckling voted for action short of a strike.

Hoyer employees are now to be re-balloted after some drivers said they had not received ballot forms. This could mean that any industrial action at the firm could not take place until mid-May at the earliest.

The vote followed strikes earlier in the year by Wincanton drivers against proposed wage cuts of up to 20 percent.

The assault on drivers' wages and conditions is being exacerbated by subcontracting of the distribution of petroleum products. Jobs are being axed, wages are being driven down, and working conditions undermined in a highly dangerous area of work. Drivers at one company told the press that their time

allowance for each delivery has been cut, and a fine of £15 is imposed on each driver missing the new target.

The union reports regular changes in drivers' contracts every three to five years, each one being to the companies' advantage. Similarly, the undermining of drivers' pension schemes has seen drivers reporting up to six different pension providers in a decade. Increasingly, final salary pension schemes are being replaced with inferior money purchase schemes.

But the main concern of the union has been to press for its inclusion in discussions on the management of the industry.

Over the last year, Unite has been actively involved in such corporatist ventures as an Industry Forum on health safety and training standards. Its concern, in the words of national officer Matt Draper, has been "bringing stability to the supply of this vital national commodity". Holland reiterated this position this week, saying the union remains committed "to achieving a negotiated settlement that brings stability and security to a vital industry and gives this workforce, and the public, confidence that the race to the bottom is ending."

That is why the union threw its weight behind and was full of praise for its "efforts to pull both sides together", as Unite general secretary Len McCluskey put it. The ACAS talks were aimed at establishing across the industry what Holland has called "minimum standards".

This phrase should ring alarm bells for every worker.

Unite has shown elsewhere what it means by such terms. Last year, it negotiated an "honourable settlement" at British Airways (BA) that went further even than the savage attacks on jobs and pay being demanded by management. The union signed up to a scabs' charter, allowing the company to train

replacement cabin crew in the event of future strikes, and pledged not to defend its own members if they took legal action against BA.

During the January strikes at Wincanton, the union refused to unite the dispute with Coryton oil refinery workers who were at risk of losing their jobs. Unite offered Wincanton a “number of concessions” to call off the strikes.

The government had already signalled its intention of deploying the military as a strikebreaking operation against any industrial action.

According to the BBC, military drivers are being put on eight-day training courses in preparation to break the strike, while 80 drivers from the Royal Air Force have been in training with one firm.

Although government and employers remain committed to a military strikebreaking option, they have toned down the rhetoric in the last two weeks. Energy Secretary Ed Davey said the government was “disappointed”, and repeated its belief “that any strike action would be wrong and unnecessary”, but urged both parties “to work towards a negotiated resolution” of the “complex issues”.

In part, the change of tone follows the embarrassment caused by government advice on stockpiling fuel three weeks ago, which led to panic buying on the forecourts. This advice was part of a calculated attempt to whip up hysteria against any possible strike, which backfired.

But, more importantly, the change of tone reflects the commitment shown by Unite to averting any strike action. The original strike ballot mandated Unite to hold a strike before April 23, and anti-union legislation requires the union to give seven days’ notice of any action. Having announced the successful ballot with a declaration that they were intent on avoiding a strike, the union has done everything possible to reassure the employers.

It immediately ruled out any strike action over the Easter period and then called off strike action during the talks—winning a remarkable deal for the employers for a one-week extension to the mandate.

This can only be because the employers are convinced of Unite’s intentions as a corporate partner.

Although details of the talks are not yet public, according to the BBC, which has seen the document meant to placate both sides in the dispute, this pledges the employers to “recognise Unite’s aspiration to

establish industry-wide minimum terms and conditions of employment, including a minimum rate of pay”.

The BBC reports, however, that “there is no commitment on the part of employers to make this happen.”

“Instead, the agreement proposes an ‘externally managed industry pay benchmarking exercise’ to help Unite identify operators not offering what it perceives as fair pay.”

On pensions, the document reportedly proposes examining options to “provide immediate pension portability and reductions in the administration costs of the scheme”.

Significantly, the BBC reports that one of the areas on which “common ground has been established” is the issue of “trade union facilities.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact