

# Steelworkers in Sheffield, UK strike after decade without a pay rise

Danny Richardson  
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Steelworkers at Sheffield's Rom Ltd are on a two-week strike against low pay. They have been out since July 28, after a 99 percent vote for action in a ballot held last month.

The workers have had no wage rise in 10 years.

Strikers at the Brightside Lane Factory told WSWS reporters they are scraping by on little more than the minimum wage.

“They make out like we are just one big happy family,” explained one picket, who has worked at the plant for 35 years. “But if I treated my family the way they treat us, I would be disowned. You can only beat a dog so much before that dog turns on you.”

The strikers are also angered by the introduction of a third shift, manned by low-paid agency workers, that has resulted in shift allowances being axed. A picket said if the company does not put forward an improved pay offer, they will go back and work to rule, and plan for the next strike.

Rom is owned by the Spanish multinational, Celsa. Conditions at its steel plants in Wales and Sheffield are brutal. Three deaths and serious injuries, including crushed limbs and burns, have been recorded over the past decade—the very same period that has seen real earnings fall.

“Since Celsa took us over they have stripped us of everything we had gained before, such as breaks and shift allowance pay,” said a picket. “We were warned if we didn't accept the changes we would be making ourselves redundant and they would close the facility,” he said.

Steelworkers were once among the highest paid sections of the working class. But many are now paid as poorly as call centre operators and bar staff, despite the dangerous conditions.

When asked why this situation had continued for so

long, another picket replied, “Hard to reply to that. We have applied each year for a pay rise. There have been times when they [management] have asked us not to approach them in the lean times.”

A full-time official of Community, the trade union involved, who was on the picket line added, “About three years ago because they [management] were struggling financially, there was an issue over the lease [of the site] so I asked for support from the guys and they gave it to them.”

She said that Community and the company management “sat around the table and I told them they would have to be serious about a pay rise the next year. We were given the impression they would do so.”

Predictably, the company duly reneged on their pledge and continued to freeze the Brightside Lane workers' pay. Posters on the factory walls summed up Community's bankrupt pro-company strategy, declaring, “We supported Celsa, why won't they support us.”

Community's insistence that workers and the company have a shared interest is a lie. Rom Ltd and Celsa's drive for profit means a war against the working class—one that the unions have actively facilitated over the past three decades, since the betrayal of the 1980 steel strike and the imposition of one corporatist agreement after another.

The strike at Rom Ltd is an expression of broader oppositional sentiments throughout the working class. In recent weeks British Airways cabin crew, Fujitsu workers, NHS cleaners and porters and London cinema workers have all struck against low pay. Last week Bank of England staff went on strike for the first time in 50 years, part of widespread anger against the Conservative government's public sector pay cap.

Cost of living pressures are hitting all workers hard.

Since last June's Brexit vote, inflation has risen to a four-year high. The price of basic food items has risen sharply, while British Gas announced last week that electricity bills will rise by 12.5 percent next year.

But despite the growing mood to fight, the Rom Ltd workers have been left to fight alone. Just 20 of the factory's 50 plus workers were called out by Community. There was no call for agency workers to join the strike and none of Celsa's other factory sites, either in Wales or in Europe, were called out. Over 500 staff and hundreds more sub-contractors are employed by Celsa in Wales.

This enabled Rom Ltd's factory manager David Carruthers to boast that the walkout would not disrupt the Brightside Lane operations. While Rom Ltd claims there is no money to fund pay increases, Celsa earned \$439 million in profits last year.

Steelworkers in Britain and globally have experienced numerous plant closures and takeovers in recent years, accompanied by job cuts, speed-ups, attacks on wage levels and the erosion of hard-won safety conditions. Some 85,000 jobs have been lost across European steelmaking since 2008. The biggest losses were in Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium and France. ThyssenKrupp, the German steel giant, cut 12,000 jobs during 2008-09.

Workers at Rom Ltd must learn the necessary lessons from these and their own experiences. A rank and file committee must be built, independent of Community. Rom workers must reach out to agency workers at the Sheffield plant, as well as to the workforce at other Celsa factories throughout the UK and across Europe for support—and to discuss a coordinated struggle against the company.



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