

UK: Heathrow Airport demands workers to take pay cut or face dismissal

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London Heathrow, the UK's busiest airport, is forcing its workers to take a 15 percent pay cut or face dismissal over the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a letter seen by Sky News, Heathrow's "Chief People Officer," Paula Stannett, told thousands of workers that they must accept a supposedly "voluntary" reduction in pay in order to bolster the airport's flagging profits. If they refuse, they will lose their jobs.

Stannett's memo threateningly states: "We are looking for everyone to play their part and are not expecting anyone to opt out, other than those who are leaving us very shortly through redundancy.

"There will be consequences if colleagues do not accept the revised terms as it will mean that we have to make further job cuts.

"It will also have consequences for those colleagues who do not wish to participate."

According to a March press release from Heathrow Airport, unions representing Heathrow workers, which include Unite and GMB, already forced through a 10 percent pay cut for their members.

"Last month," the statement reads, "[O]ur union partners confirmed that their members have agreed on a temporary 10% pay cut in salary and allowances. It is only right that similar pay reductions are taken on by everyone in the business as we fight to ringfence as many jobs in the future and play our part in protecting as many colleagues as possible."

The time limits for this supposedly "temporary" pay cut are not stated and could be extended indefinitely with the say-so of Heathrow's loyal "union partners," under the guise of protecting jobs in crisis conditions.

Setting the stage for this latest attack on workers' pay by pushing through the 10 percent cut, the unions

emboldened Heathrow to go even further with its latest draconian proposal. Stannett's recent memo states: "[M]y proposal is that we should offer furlough followed by voluntary severance for colleagues who do not want to take a pay reduction.

"In the unlikely case that colleagues continue to refuse to take part, dismissal and reinstatement might be the final step."

It adds, insincerely: "Obviously that is something I am keen to avoid," while threatening, "although I can confirm that is an option that is legally available to the company to take."

Workers who are "dismissed" and then "reinstated" would get their jobs back under conditions that are even less favourable than the shoddy contracts that many currently labour under, a source told Sky News.

The UK aviation industry has seen a massive slump in passenger numbers as international travel is drastically curtailed or banned outright amid the coronavirus outbreak. In February and March, before the pandemic had even hit with full force, Heathrow saw a nearly 5 percent (4.8) reduction in overall passenger numbers, and a huge 28.4 percent drop in Asia-Pacific traffic in February.

Heathrow management announced that they would be shutting one of their two runways from April 6, as well as two of their four terminals, due to reduced air traffic.

The amount of cargo passing through Heathrow also fell in February by 9.5 percent, as the effect of the coronavirus pandemic hit global trade. Heathrow handles a large proportion of the UK's air freight, including 41 percent of pharmaceutical imports, such as medicines.

At the end of March, transport minister, Chris Heaton-Harris, told Members of Parliament that air traffic volumes were down 92 percent compared to this time

last year.

Heathrow Airport has been waging war on its workforce for many years, seeking to cut pay and conditions, with the full collaboration of the unions. While workers languish on rock-bottom pay, the airport and its chief executive have been raking in the millions and billions.

Last year, Heathrow Airport, which is owned by a consortium of wealthy sovereign, infrastructure and pension funds, including the Spanish transportation industry group Ferrovial and the UK's Universities Superannuation Scheme, reported revenue of £2.3 billion in the nine months up to September 30.

In 2018, Heathrow's CEO, John Holland-Kaye—who has now agreed to forgo his seven-figure salary for three months in an attempt to dampen criticism of the airport's coronavirus policy—received a 103.2 percent pay increase, with his basic remuneration package rising from £2.097 million in 2017 to £4.2 million.

By contrast, according to estimates from the Unite union, in November 2019, over 2,000 workers at Heathrow airport were earning below the then so-called London Living Wage (LLW) of £10.55 (now increased to a still derisory £10.75 per hour).

At the start of April, Heathrow Airport reneged on its previous worthless pledge to fund implementation of the LLW to all its outsourced workers from this month, citing the financial impact of the coronavirus pandemic. Outsourced workers include cleaning workers from ISS and security workers from Mitie.

In response to this announcement, the GMB union, which represents many of these contract workers, issued a toothless statement, with Perry Phillips, GMB regional organiser for aviation at Heathrow, saying that it “is both unfair and downright outrageous.” The union made no mention of calling any action to defend the wages and conditions of its workers.

“I am calling on Heathrow to reconsider its decision to stop the implementation of the London Living Wage rise,” Phillips pleaded, “and to do the right thing by honouring its agreement and pay it to those workers who are expecting it in their wage packets from April 2020.”

Similarly, the Unite union has done nothing to improve the pay and conditions of its members, repeatedly selling out industrial action at Heathrow Airport. Last year, more than 4,000 security guards,

firefighters, engineers and passenger service staff at London Heathrow were involved in a pay dispute after rejecting an 18-month pay rise offer averaging just 2.7 percent.

The union called off six days of planned industrial action set for July 26–27, August 5–6 and 23–24 last year and asked its members to vote on a new pay offer agreed between the union and Heathrow airport.

After members again rejected the new offer by a huge majority, Unite did all it could to give the airport the most favourable terms, stating that they “will be making arrangements to refresh our strike mandate with a fresh industrial action ballot of workers across all of Heathrow's terminals. As a result, we will not be announcing any strike dates and would urge Heathrow bosses to seize this window of opportunity to get back around the negotiating table.”

In the true spirit of the adage “never let a good crisis go to waste,” the ruling elite is determined to use the coronavirus pandemic to push through long-planned attacks on the pay and conditions of workers.

Heathrow management's ultimatum follows the pattern set by companies across the UK and internationally in foisting the economic consequences of the coronavirus crisis onto the shoulders of the working class. New benchmarks are being set, with mass layoffs, wage reductions and attacks on working conditions the order of the day for profit-driven corporations.



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