

UK strikes challenge company cost-cutting and trade union collusion

Thomas Scripps
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Strikes are ongoing at British Gas, British Airways, logistics company DHL and haulier Eddie Stobart. Another is imminent at bus company Go North West. They signal that the suppression of industrial action enforced by the trade union bureaucracy throughout the pandemic is beginning to break down.

When the COVID-19 virus reached Europe, a series of wildcat actions for worker safety in Britain and across the continent raised the spectre of a social explosion. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government and its counterparts were forced to implement lockdowns and furlough schemes. These were combined with a relentless campaign by the trade unions, working hand-in-glove with the Conservative government in the UK, to head off strike action in the name of "national unity".

Given their head, the corporations declared open season on their workers' jobs and conditions. In the aftermath of the first lockdown in particular, multiple employers launched savage "fire and rehire" plans, forcing workers to accept inferior contracts under threat of redundancy. These assaults took place against a background of rising unemployment, as hundreds of thousands were laid off nationally, and were aided once again by the trade union bureaucracy, who pulled their usual tricks in delaying, interrupting, isolating and exhausting action, before foisting a deal agreed with the company on their members.

Sections of workers, however, have battled through the innumerable "consultative ballots" and rounds of ACAS (the national arbitration scheme) talks and forced their unions to finally organise strikes.

The largest action is at British Gas. More than 7,000 engineers in the GMB union struck for five days earlier this month against fire and rehire plans which threaten a lengthened working week and pay cuts of thousands of pounds. The company is carrying out a massive restructuring programme involving attacks on conditions

and an expected 5,000 job losses. Workers struck this Wednesday and will do so again today and on January 25 and 29 and February 1.

Parent company Centrica is under severe pressure from its shareholders having lost out in recent years in a fiercely competitive energy market—shares in British Gas have fallen 75 percent in the last five years. The *Times* reported last week, "Cost-cutting set to pay off with British Gas profits".

The GMB have made every effort to impose a rotten deal on their members. Close to five months passed between them receiving a consultative ballot for a strike in August and the first actual strike day in January. In that time, unions representing thousands of other Centrica workers signed off on an agreement with the company.

The same is happening at Heathrow Airport, where around 850 British Airways cargo staff face a fire and rehire threat set to undermine their conditions and cost them thousands of pounds a year. Unite has organised nine days of "discontinuous strike action" from today until February 7.

Thousands of job losses and significant pay cuts have already been suffered by BA's workforce over the last year, through deals negotiated with Unite.

In Manchester, close to 500 bus drivers employed by Go North West, part of the Go-Ahead Group, are also threatened with fire and rehire. The company intends to reduce the number of drivers employed by 10 percent, tear up a sick pay agreement and increase unpaid working hours, amounting to a £2,500 pay cut.

Unite received an overwhelming yes vote in a consultative ballot for strike action in September but organised nothing. They have pleaded with the company to accept their plan for "cost reductions of around £1 million and a pay freeze worth around £200,000." Go North West refused and is now speaking with each driver individually to force them to sign the new contract. The

union said it will ballot workers for actual strike action but has not set a date.

Like Centrica, International Airline Group (the owners of British Airways) and Go-Ahead Group are multi-billion-pound corporations with struggling share prices. They are trying to claw additional profits out of the backs of their workers to satisfy investors.

Other essential workers, required to work throughout the pandemic, are being forced to remain on poverty-level wages while their employers rake in record profits. The pandemic has been characterised by the vast enrichment of a tiny oligarchy on one side and the impoverishment of the working class on the other.

These issues are brought out sharply in the strike at DHL Supply Chain in Croxteth, Liverpool. The 120 workers represented by Unite fulfil a delivery contract with Burton Biscuits and AB World Foods. They took several days of strike action over the Christmas period, held another 48-hour strike this Wednesday-Thursday, and have action planned for February 2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 9.

Strikers are demanding a pay increase and an end to victimisations of union members. They are paid £8.94 an hour, which will be just two-and-a-half pence above the minimum wage when it is lifted this April. According to the Unite regional officer Kenny Rowe, several members have been “suspended or sacked on spurious charges, due to management victimisation”. During the strikes in December, management called the police to the picket lines on at least 10 occasions, involving up to three police vehicles at a time.

DHL is owned by Deutsche Post, one of the 30 largest companies in Germany and the world’s largest courier company. It posted record annual earnings in 2020 after they increased by 17 percent to €4.84 billion, mainly thanks to its DHL business booming in the pandemic. The company expects profits to rise again in 2021 and 2022.

The value of the company’s shares has increased 27 percent in the last 12 months and the company has paid out dividends totalling more than €1.4 billion for the last four years.

Unite first dragged the DHL dispute into fruitless negotiations with ACAS. When the company refused to budge, the union called a strike demanding a pay agreement just 50 pence above the minimum wage. The union then called off five days of strike action in late December and early January as an act of “good faith” to re-enter talks with DHL. This charade quickly fell apart, with Rowe admitting that the company had made “an entirely unacceptable offer that in no way meets workers’

needs.”

Drivers for Eddie Stobart Logistics are in a similar position. The company has implemented a pay freeze for its lorry drivers in Warrington, contracted to Walkers Crisps, and refuses to negotiate with Unite. The drivers carried out a three-week overtime ban from December 26. They will begin another overtime ban tomorrow, through to February 16, and then strike for four days. Another overtime ban is scheduled for February 20-27, and another strike for February 28-March 2.

Unite were first given a mandate for strike action by these workers in May 2019 and scheduled a series of strikes and overtime bans. These were suspended as another “act of goodwill” when the company promised to engage with the union.

Increased demand due to the pandemic has helped Eddie Stobart Logistics swing from a £6 million loss in the six months to May 2019 to a £16 million profit a year later.

These actions point to the growing demands in the working class for living standards and working conditions to be defended. But they also make clear that this sentiment cannot find expression through the trade unions, which are engaged in corporatist relations with the employers. They will continue as they have done for decades, organising partial actions which can be suspended at the first possible opportunity, and called off with a sellout deal drawn up by the employers.

The pandemic and economic crisis confronting the working class demand a frontal assault on the major corporations and a massive redistribution of social wealth. This can only be organised by workers independently of the trade union bureaucracy, through rank-and-file committees, and guided by a socialist perspective.



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