British Gas workers continue strike action against fire and rehire threats

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Around 7,500 workers at energy company British Gas began a four-day strike yesterday. British Gas, owned by Centrica, supplies gas and electric energy and services equipment and has around 20,000 employees.

Those on strike include 4,000 service and repair gas engineers, 1,700 smart metering engineers, 600 central heating installers, 540 electrical engineers and 170 specialist business gas engineers. The GMB union members have already taken 12 days of strike action. This has led to a backlog of 170,000 boiler repairs and the delay of 200,000 service visits.

Yesterday, the GMB announced an additional 12 days of strikes, to be taken in three lots of four days—on February 12, February 19 and February 26. The union's Central Executive Council says it will continue strike action through to mid-April.

Workers are opposing British Gas's plans to impose inferior contracts which would mean an effective 20 percent pay cut. The company announced restructuring plans in June last year, including shedding 5,000 jobs.

Following negotiations, three of the other unions recognised by British Gas, Unison, Unite and Prospect, reached agreements to accept the inferior terms. This includes 7,000 front-line office workers, most of whom are represented by Unison.

The GMB has done everything it can to try and reach its own rotten agreement with the company. The union held a consultative ballot in August after British Gas revealed its plans returning a 90 percent vote in favour, but delayed calling a strike ballot for months. This gave space for the other unions to negotiate their sellouts.

Only in November did the GMB ballot its members for strike action. The votes in December produced an 86 percent majority for strike action by gas and electrical engineers and 89 percent by other British Gas GMB members.

Centrica announced it was prepared to issue section 188 notices to its employees. Such a notice enables an employer who has failed to negotiate changes to fire and reinstate its employees on different terms and conditions.

In fighting this threat, British Gas workers are combatting a national assault by big business on the working class. So called "fire and rehire" ultimatums are becoming the chosen method by which companies push through long-planned attacks on workers' jobs and conditions, using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext.

The unions' only concern is that such methods undermine their role as a labour police force, able to impose changes on behalf of the employers. At a UK parliament business select committee discussing the dispute on February 2, GMB national officer Justin Bowden accused the company of "poisoning the well", adding, "It has no place in modern industrial relations, it is an utterly un-British type of mechanism."

Other examples of the "hire and fire" strategy include its use by bus company Go North West in Manchester. The company, which is part of the multi-billion pound Go Ahead group, wants to impose an inferior contract including a 10 percent pay cut, working extra hours for no additional pay and cuts to sick pay for the 500 drivers and other staff. The company is pushing ahead with these plans despite the Unite union proposing measures to save the company £1 million a year and a pay freeze saving the company an additional £200,000. Unite is holding a ballot of its members at the depot, which runs until February 9.

The bus workers voted for strike action by a more than 90 percent majority in a consultative ballot last September. Rather than proceeding to a strike ballot, the union appealed to the Go Ahead group to pressure

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Go North West to drop their plans.

Another example is at British Airways' cargo handling operation at Heathrow airport. The company threatened to fire and rehire its entire workforce on inferior terms. Some workers faced losing a quarter of their income under the new terms. The Unite members voted to strike almost unanimously and came out for nine days between December 25 and January 2. The union initially refused to set strike dates, hoping to reach agreement with management, as it did in other sectors of BA.

Three further days of strikes beginning January 22 were suspended at the last minute, with Unite citing "progress" in negotiations. The two parties reached an agreement and another round of strikes set for this weekend has been suspended pending a ballot on BA's new terms, which Unite is recommending workers accept.

Unite states that the deal includes "the end of fire and rehire" and "an increase in pay for a significant proportion of staff". Two key points listed are "no *compulsory* redundancies" and an agreement that "workers will revert to previous contractual provisions *subject to agreed changes* " [emphasis added]. As of this writing the ballot result has still to be announced.

The extent of employers' fire and rehire threats nationally was revealed by the results of a Trades Union Congress (TUC) poll published January 25. The poll showed nearly one in 10 (nine percent) of workers in Britain had been faced with having to re-apply for their jobs on worse terms and conditions or be sacked. Nearly a quarter reported they had seen their hours or pay cut back since March last year. This rises to 30 percent of low-paid workers, earning less than £15,000 a year.

Reporting the poll, the TUC writes, "The government promised in 2019 that it would bring forward a new employment bill to improve people's rights at work. But there has been no sign of the legislation. The TUC says that improving workers' rights and pay is a key test of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's 'levelling up agenda'. The union body says any move to water down European Union-derived protections on safe working hours, rest-breaks 'would be a betrayal of that promise.'"

The TUC has the gall to make this statement after having effectively declared open season on workers' lives and livelihoods throughout the pandemic. When the virus struck, the TUC immediately entered talks with the government and oversaw a situation in which strike after strike was called off in the name of national unity. This opened the door to the wave of fire and rehire threats and the "levelling down" of employment contracts which the TUC now reports with feigned dismay.

The TUC then supported the criminal reopening of the economy, in what it hailed as a "mass return to work", allowing thousands of workers to become infected, and backed the "winter plan" of unemployment, pay cuts and corporate bailouts devised by Chancellor Rishi Sunak. TUC General Secretary Frances O'Grady posed for photo opportunities in Downing Street with Sunak and Confederation of British Industry (CBI) Director General Dame Carolyn Fairbairn.

British Gas workers must learn the lessons of the past year. The unions have played the key role in facilitating Johnson's murderous response to the pandemic and have opened the working class up to unprecedented attacks on jobs and conditions. The GMB's objective is ultimately to force a company-drafted agreement on its members. Workers can only fight for their own interests by establishing rank-and-file strike committees to take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucrats.

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