

British Gas workers strike continues against “fire and rehire” threat

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Seven thousand British Gas engineers began another four-day strike Friday.

A previous four-day strike ended March 8 bringing to 30 the total number of strike days. They are opposing new contracts the company is attempting to impose through a “fire and rehire” strategy that would see an effective 20 percent pay cut, with some workers losing up to £15,000 a year.

This week the GMB trade union announced a further series of four-day strikes—on March 19 and March 26—to follow the March 12-15 action and warned that strikes could continue to mid-April.

After taking 18 days of strikes, the GMB and Centrica, parent company of British Gas, emailed workers February 12 to say that new negotiations were going ahead. The union had called off planned action on the evening of February 11 to enter talks at the government’s Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). On February 14, the GMB imposed a “temporary cessation of hostilities” stating, “The company has suspended its actions against our members and in turn the strike has been suspended.”

At the ACAS brokered talks, British Gas refused to take the threat of “fire and rehire” off the table and strike action was resumed on February 19.

British Gas put forward a new offer, which was essentially just a rehash of the previous contract, with workers expected to work an extra three hours a week with no extra pay, work unsociable hours and accept inferior pay and benefits. The only difference was a one-off payment of up to £4,000 as an inducement to accept. The threat of “fire and rehire” was not removed.

However, the GMB union still put the offer to a ballot the week beginning February 28. The result of the ballot of the Field staff bargaining group was an

overwhelming rejection by a 79 percent majority on an 88 percent turnout. The GMB announced the result on March 5 and said that the four-day strike planned to begin that day would go ahead.

British Gas has threatened the workforce that they must sign up to the new deal by March 25 or face being sacked on March 31.

Chris O’Shea, chief executive of British Gas’s parent company, Centrica, said, “Whilst we’ve reached collective agreements with the majority of our trade unions, we have been unable to secure an agreement with the GMB despite two extensive rounds of talks and making significant concessions.

“We’ll now talk directly to those colleagues who have not yet agreed their new contracts and we will go the extra mile to try and avoid the need to dismiss and re-engage.”

British Gas workers and their families have been taking to social media to condemn Centrica’s intimidatory tactics, and stating their determination to fight for their pay, terms and conditions.

On twitter one wrote, “Feeling very deflated with the consultations coming up and getting closer to 25th/31st. Discussing with my wife how we’re going to manage with me doing a 40-hour week & my daughter starting school this year...”

Another wrote, “So very angry, today my husband has a consultation where he will be told how his employer is dismissing him because he is unwilling to have the employment contract he has held for 40 years torn up and be forced to work longer more unsociable hours.”

Determined not to sign one wrote, “Had my 1-2-1 consultation, still not signing, 30 yrs service coming to an end in next 3 weeks...”

Another wrote, “I will be fired from my job on the

31st. All because I won't sign a hugely reduced contract that our workforce has overwhelmingly rejected... CEOs and directors make themselves millionaires in a few years. How is that fair?"

For the union, the sticking point is the refusal of British Gas to drop the "fire and rehire" threat as it undermines the union's role as an arm of corporate management. Following the announcement of further strike days in March, GMB General Secretary Justin Bowden said, "The company needs to understand its fire and rehire plan is the big obstacle to members accepting a deal—they must withdraw it now."

All along, the core of the GMB's argument was that the actions of British Gas were impacting on Centrica's share value. Bowden again pointed to this imperative, as if the interests of workers at British Gas and corporate millionaires and billionaires have anything in common. "The behaviour of British Gas bosses is hurting workers, customers and ultimately company shareholders. GMB's executive has determined action could continue to mid-April in this deadlocked dispute."

The use of "fire and rehire" is the weapon of choice by corporations using the opportunity supplied by the COVID-19 pandemic to push through long-desired restructuring. A recent Trades Union Congress poll indicated nearly ten percent of workers have faced re-applying for their jobs on worse terms and conditions or be sacked.

ACAS has carried out a study of the "fire and rehire" process, but as yet its findings have not been released. In an email of March 9, Scottish National Party MP, Gavin Newlands wrote to Kwasi Kwarteng, the Conservative government's Secretary for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). Referring to the British Gas and other "fire and rehire" disputes, he wrote, "On 24th of February the parliamentary Under Secretary of state for BEIS... told the House [of Parliament] that ACAS has completed this work and shared his insight with officials at the BEIS."

As with the trade union bureaucracy, Newlands fears that firms using "fire and rehire" strategies will undermine the corporatist role of the trade unions. He wrote that there was "surely a case for publishing their findings as quickly as possible so to allow for in-depth consultation and discussion by interested parties such as trade unions and employee representatives. Instead,

there will be another long wait to add to the time that ACAS has taken to get to this stage."

Newlands pointed to the reason why ACAS's findings have not been published: "I am concerned that this extremely lengthy period of time is indicative of an attempt to avoid this process concluding before Centrica potentially carry out their threat to terminate the contracts of those who refused to sign up to wage cuts and downgraded terms and conditions."

Hundreds of bus drivers at Go North West in Manchester, owned by Go Ahead, are also striking at present opposing a fire and rehire plot. Workers at British Airways and Heathrow Airport have faced similar ultimatums. Around 200 workers at aircraft parts manufacturer SPS Technologies in Leicester, members of the Unite union, began a strike March 12 over "fire and rehire" threats that would leave them between £2,500 and £3,000 a year worse off, with three other strike days planned.

Fighting these attacks requires a united offensive of the working class, organised in fighting organisations. The Socialist Equality Party calls on British Gas workers to oppose the GMB union bureaucracy and establish rank-and-file committees independent of them. British Gas strikers must establish contact with all workers fighting fire and rehire ultimatums and turn for support to the 20,000 workers in the Centrica group and the nearly 700,000 employed throughout the UK's energy sector. Contact us today to discuss the way forward.



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