

British Gas sends out dismissal notices to strikers effective April 1

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British Gas sent out dismissal notices to striking workers who have refused to sign an inferior contract Monday, including a 20 percent pay cut.

A letter gives formal notice, with 12 weeks' pay in lieu of notice, terminating the position of those not signing the new contract. The notice states that the workers who have not signed will be sacked on April 1. In the last days, workers who have refused to sign—some with three decades or more service—have posted comments on social media saying they would rather lose their jobs than accept the conditions being imposed.

The notices were sent on the last day of the latest four-day strike by around 7,000 workers involved in the dispute, taking total days of industrial action to 42. The strike began when the company laid out “fire and rehire” plans to drastically undermine conditions to shore up competitiveness in the cut-throat UK energy market.

According to British Gas, who have been intimidating workers—approaching them on an individual basis to sign the new contract—“well over 95%” have signed up to the new terms, meaning that hundreds of workers who haven't face the sack within days.

That a powerful section of the working class, employed in one of the UK's main energy suppliers as part of a 20,000 strong workforce, face mass dismissal is entirely the responsibility of the trade union bureaucracy—who have enforced the division of the workforce and isolated the strike.

Last December, Centrica, parent company of British Gas, revealed it had spent over 300 hours in talks with the UNISON, GMB, Unite and Prospect unions at British Gas aimed at a passing a “modernisation” contract. All the unions bar the GMB recommended the new contract to their members. Centrica revealed,

“despite shaping the proposals with us and UNISON over several months, the GMB changed their mind at the last minute and recommended that their members reject those same proposals.”

The GMB's pose of opposition was an attempt to save face. But the role of the GMB since they called the first strikes against British Gas in January has been dictated by the same pro-company agenda as the other unions. The union insisted that it was prepared to discuss any changes that British Gas wanted to impose, with the only proviso that the company took the threat to “fire and rehire off the table.”

Never at any stage did the GMB call on other workers in the British Gas group, or the nearly 700,000 strong workforce in the UK energy sector, to back the strike. None of the union's 620,000 strong membership were ever mobilised in support. After 15 days of strikes, the GMB suspended industrial action to enter talks with the company, which failed.

In an e-mail sent to strikers around two weeks prior to March 25, the GMB then told its members, “If you plan to stay with British Gas after 31 March and intend to ultimately sign a new contract, our lawyers' advice is to do so by noon on 25 March if you want to avoid the loss of protected terms and changes you have fought for.”

The message was clear from the GMB to any worker planning on continuing to fight the company's fire and rehire threat: “Sign or else”.

It has done nothing since but issue more pathetic pleas to British Gas CEO Chris O'Shea and the company's shareholders to restore the cosy relationship with the GMB.

The day before the company started sending out its dismissal notices, the GMB was calling on strikers and the wider public to “Tell the British Gas board: stop

fire and rehire”. The London region of the GMB tweeted a plea from the union that, “Board members at British Gas (and its parent company Centrica) earn millions and have the power to stop this shameful act in its tracks.” The letter is addressed to “Dear Centrica Board Member.”

The same executives who are enforcing the sacking of workers are asked, “Please use your position to do the right thing for hardworking British Gas employees. For the sake of your own reputation, it’s time you reined in your out-of-control CEO Chris O’Shea.”

On the eve of the company sending out dismissal letters this week, the union said in a March 25 statement, “GMB has agreed to declare an official national lockout dispute with British Gas from April 1,” before adding vaguely, “There will also be further strikes and other appropriate action in this deadlocked dispute.”

It added, “There is still time to pull back. Mr O’Shea should do what’s right for the business, the customers and the workers and take the April 1 deadline off the table.”

The union bureaucracy has been able to push through its agenda, despite the determination of workers to fight, due to the slavish support offered by the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party.

Their response to the e-mail from the GMB to strikers calling on them to sign the new contracts was to make out that nothing had fundamentally changed. All that was required was a bit of pressure being placed on the union’s executive.

In a March 12 article noting a “more sombre mood on the picket lines...” following “the union sending letters with legal advice recommending that strikers sign new contracts by 25 March,” the SP said that the GMB did this “seemingly over the heads of the elected reps...” It urged that a “strategy of how the strike could be escalated further following the rejection should be discussed by the reps [i.e., junior ranking bureaucrats] and put to a national meeting of the workers on strike to decide upon.”

A *Socialist Worker* article March 12 noted that “some workers are worried after the GMB told them they should sign the contract before March 25.” The SWP concluded that the “GMB bureaucracy has failed to offer leadership at key points”, while claiming that British Gas workers could win the dispute by “stopping

the union leader's hesitations and escalating the action.”

The SWP’s next article on March 21 cited a news update from the GMB, stating again that while “GMB national leadership have failed to provide leadership at a number of vital points... Strikers need to tell their executive that instead of surrender they want escalation.”

The only genuine escalation on offer is in the SWP’s efforts to subordinate workers to the union bureaucracy. Its latest March 26 article purported to answer the GMB’s betrayal by an appeal to the rest of the trade union bureaucracy. “The union leaders (!) should immediately call an all-out strike and encourage British Gas workers who’ve signed the contract—in the GMB and other unions—to join it.”

The unions, backed to the hilt by the pseudo-left groups, are intent on imposing yet another defeat. Workers at British Gas must turn to a new strategy and leadership.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for the building of rank-and-file action committees to unite the strikes of British Gas workers with those of educators in schools, colleges and universities, British Telecom staff, civil servants, and water, bus, rail, logistics, and airport workers. Many of these strikes are also against “fire and rehire” operations.

On Saturday April 10, the SEP is holding a public meeting, Form a Network of Rank-and-File Action Committees for Safe Workplaces! We urge British Gas workers and all others in struggle to register here and attend this vital event.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact