

GMB union betrays British Gas strike as deadline passes and hundreds are dismissed

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The deadline for British Gas engineers to sign a fire and rehire contract including a longer working week and a 15 percent pay cut came into effect at midday, Wednesday April 14.

The outcome of the dispute at British Gas has major implications for the entire working class. Research has shown that one in 10 workers have been forced to reapply for their job on inferior pay and terms since the start of the pandemic. The dispute at British Gas is the first attempt by a major company to impose fire and rehire contracts on its workforce nationwide.

Opposition from GMB members was resolute, with around 7,000 engineers taking 42 days of strike action leading up to April 14. This is the largest strike action in the sector in four decades. However, this resistance has been isolated by the GMB. In the run up to the deadline for signing the new contract, the union has sought to deliberately wear down the resistance of the workforce, while scaling back industrial action.

The GMB organised no further strike action between the end of March and April 14 and instructed its members to sign the new contract when the dismissal notices were sent out over a fortnight ago. Many did so, concluding that they had no defenders and no alternative. Thanks to this treachery, the one-day stoppage by the GMB on April 14 timed to coincide with the deadline for dismissal took the form of a funeral service for the struggle.

Even though they were provided with no means to fight back by the union, hundreds of engineers reportedly refused to sign and were dismissed. The company issued around 1,000 dismissal notices on April 1 and according to the *Guardian* around 500 had still refused to sign up a day before the deadline.

British Gas engineers took to social media to express their shock and disgust. On the twitter hashtag

#StopTheBritishGasFire, dismissed engineers showed what they had been doing this time last year, posting comments with photographs of them stood next to their vans, one delivering food parcels and another medical supplies. One worker explained how he was a third-generation engineer with 15 years' service with the company. Others reported how they were made to feel like criminals, with management demanding compensation for any property not returned, even work boots. Photographs of rows of returned British Gas blue service vans lined in company car parks went viral.

The GMB has betrayed both those workers who refused to sign and those who did so under extreme duress. GMB National Secretary Justin Bowden issued a statement on the union website, consisting of nothing but moralising bluster. "That British Gas doesn't give a toss for either its customers or staff is evidenced by the mass sacking of engineers that it badly needs to service these customers.

"Whilst there is sadly nothing to stop a company bullying its own staff to sign terms they don't accept, and those who don't submit to bullying, GMB members will not accept the outcome of this nine-month campaign of British Gas bullying. That is why they are staging their 43rd day of strike action today."

This statement is an admission of bankruptcy. Bowden and the GMB championed a campaign against fire and rehire based on appeals to parent company Centrica, CEO Chris O'Shea, and its major investors and shareholders to do the right thing. Now he admits they have nothing but contempt for the workforce.

Bowden absurdly maintains that the union will stand up to the bullying by British Gas while simultaneously informing workers that nothing can be done. Once again, the GMB invited British Gas engineers to place their faith in an intervention by Prime Minister Boris

Johnson against fire and rehire.

Neither the GMB, nor any other union, will fight the draconian methods of fire and rehire because this requires a mobilisation of the working class against the state and major corporations, into which the unions have become increasingly integrated.

The GMB would rather allow its own members to be fired en masse and have their conditions reduced at a stroke than wage a genuine struggle. Throughout the dispute, the union sought to assure the company that its opposition to fire and rehire did not exclude agreeing concessions at workers' expense. It took every opportunity to declare itself the most reliable upholder of the company's profitability and corporate image.

All the other unions at British Gas, from the smaller union Prospect, to Unite and Unison, signed on to the new terms for their membership from the beginning. The "modernisation" plan also involved announcing 5,000 redundancies.

Even on the day of the dismissal deadline and the token day of action, the GMB provided very little coverage on its own Twitter page of the picket lines and protests around the country. It was almost exclusively devoted to footage of a succession of Labour MPs, including former leader Ed Miliband and current Deputy leader Angela Rayner, professing their unswerving support for British Gas workers, claiming to be standing up for them in Parliament and calling for the government to intervene to abolish fire and rehire.

This is a travesty. The only interests the trade unions and Labour Party uphold are those of the British ruling elite. In relation to fire and rehire the Labour controlled Tower Hamlets local authority in London was one of the first employers during the pandemic to adopt the policy, against 4,000 of its employees, in June 2020.

The Labour Party and unions have acted as de facto partners with the Johnson government, condemning their members to work in Covid infested schools, offices, garages, depots and factories, leading to thousands of preventable deaths. They ensured a massive upward transfer of wealth by signing off on the multi-billion-pound bailout of the corporations by the Johnson government, while the working class was hit with job losses and pay cuts.

The dispute at British Gas over fire and rehire provides another object lesson in how the trade unions serve to sabotage any genuine fight and are prepared to

hand workers over, bound and gagged, to the corporations.

Last Saturday, the Socialist Equality Party held a meeting to establish a network of rank-and-file committees as genuine fighting organisations of workers, independent of and opposed to the corporatist trade unions. We reiterate our appeal to British Gas workers to take up this struggle.

The allies of British Gas workers are not the Labour Party or the Conservative government, or the corporate heads and shareholders. The pandemic has confirmed that the real wealth creators in society and the social force most critical to the economy is the working class, which must begin to assert its interests against the capitalist profit system.



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