

Pseudo-left apologists for the GMB's betrayal of the British Gas dispute

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The sell-out by the GMB union of the British Gas engineers dispute against the imposition of a fire and rehire contract was facilitated by the slavish support of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP).

After 42 days of strike action, British Gas was able to enforce its contracts including a 15 percent pay cut by the April 14 deadline. In late March, the GMB had instructed around 7,000 British Gas engineers that they had no other option other than to sign the ultimatum, marking the de facto betrayal of the largest and most protracted strike action in the sector for over four decades.

The union organised a solitary 43rd day of action to coincide with the deadline, but this took the form of a funeral service for the dispute—with the GMB making only vague references to continued action without even setting any dates. It has ensured that most engineers have been transferred over to the inferior terms, having signed the contract under duress. Those who refused have been fired without any redundancy pay. According to the BBC, 500 workers had refused to sign by the time the deadline expired, but this was based on assertions by British Gas.

The role of the SWP during the dispute was to insist that success was possible under the leadership of the GMB, providing only that the demand to “escalate” the dispute was taken up by engineers. As with the entire pseudo-left fraternity, its role was to provide left and militant credentials to the union bureaucracy and disarm workers seeking to fight. Urging all-out action, addressed always to the GMB, served as a cover for the union’s efforts to confine its members to rolling industrial action, isolated from any solidarity action with other workers.

Far from advocating genuine solidarity action the coverage from the SWP was replete with calls for Twitter messages of support and financial contributions to the GMB. It placed every confidence in the GMB organising an all-out strike. After 11 days of rolling strikes beginning in January, in a February 2 article, “British Gas strikers are resolute”, the SWP wrote, “If British Gas bosses don’t back down, the strike should escalate to indefinite action. Collections and donations to a strike fund will be vital.”

The GMB’s real orientation was on winning endorsements from the company CEO, investors and major shareholders, from Labour MPs and even from Tory Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his government. As proof of its role as a loyal adjunct of the union, the SWP’s articles provided direct links for all expressions of solidarity and financial assistance to the GMB’s official website. These links included the official petition of the GMB and its pathetic appeal to Centrica (parent company of British Gas) CEO Christopher O’Shea to act in workers interests and rescind the contracts, alongside its

promotion of the political alliance with the Conservative government, which it claimed was in opposition to “fire and rehire” contracts! The GMB’s own accompanying text stated, “After months of pressure from MPs of all parties and even the Conservative government, the company will not take its widely condemned ‘fire and rehire’ threat off the table and so GMB was forced to ballot for industrial action.”

After 15 days of rolling stoppages, the GMB suspended strike action on February 11 to enter talks at the conciliation service ACAS. It did so without even demanding the ultimatum to sack workers on March 31 was lifted. British Gas workers saw this as a warning of an impending sell-out and took to social media to condemn the actions of the union, as the WWS reported .

The GMB emerged from negotiations to present a revised “offer” essentially no different than that which had provoked the strike action. This included working an additional 156 hours a year for no additional pay, and a six-day rolling roster, which could be changed based on customer demand. The company offered a £4,000 lump sum payment to accept. The GMB presented this to its membership with the firing deadline still hanging over their heads and without a recommendation to reject. This was voted down by a majority of 4 to 1.

The spinelessness of the SWP was exemplified by coverage containing interviews with strikers denouncing the proposed deal, while it refused to advance any criticism or alternative to the GMB. Instead, on March 5, in an article, “British Gas workers reject insulting offer and return to picket lines,” the SWP stated, “The strikes have forced the company to make concessions—escalating them can force more from the bosses. An all-out strike could have the power to take fire and rehire completely off the table and repel attacks on workers’ conditions.”

The repeated call for escalated strike action by the GMB was made even as the union was in the final stages of demobilising opposition to British Gas. It was only after the GMB issued emails to strikers urging them to sign the contract by the March 25 deadline that the SWP made any direct criticism. In a March 21 article, “Crunch time looms in British Gas battle” the SWP urged, “Strikers need to tell their executive that of instead of surrender they want escalation.”

Just two days before the extended April 14 deadline, an April 12 SWP article, “British Gas workers are victims of fire and rehire,” admitted, “The GMB called a strike for this Wednesday 14 April. It says further strikes will be called. But the union has made no statements about its members who have been forced to quit their jobs. The GMB national leaders have repeatedly failed to escalate action to break the ruthless bosses assault. Meanwhile, other unions have looked on and done nothing effective.”

Even after detailing this treachery the SWP insisted that the dispute

must remain in the hands of the GMB, writing, “If union leaders don’t now challenge fire and rehire it will be used by other firms.”

The SWP continues to insist that the trade unions are the basic organisation for combating the employers and that their control over the working class is sacrosanct, no matter what filthy betrayal is carried out. Their comment on April 14 again insisted, “After British Gas sackings, unions must shift now.”

This is a “shift” that must be brought about by membership pressure. “Workers have to act themselves,” the SWP states, but only to “push trade union leaders to confront ‘fire and rehire’ or it will become a terrible norm.”

The lesson of the British Gas dispute is that the trade unions act as the essential mechanism for fire and rehire to become the norm. Where they are unable to prevent strikes from taking place, their role is isolate every manifestation of opposition, wear down the resistance, and then impose the dictates of the corporations.

The British Gas dispute confirms that the unions respond to pressure from below not by waging a struggle for the working class, but by integrating themselves closer still into the structures of management and the state apparatus to better suppress their members.

A more elaborated piece on the dispute published April 18, “Thousands of British Gas workers let down by unions” has the temerity to declare, “The problem was the lack of effective strategy on the workers’ side.”

It was the role of the SWP to ensure that workers never had an independent strategy and remained chained to a union apparatus that acts solely “on the bosses’ side”.

“There was an alternative,” the SWP writes. “The GMB should have moved early to an all-out strike. Instead of just a backlog of repairs, bosses would have had a crisis on their hands. Other unions with members in different sections at British Gas should have come out in solidarity with the engineers. Instead there are allegations that they did deals with management to advance their own standing at the company.

“The [Trades Union Congress] could have called for protests and walkouts. It could have launched a national financial appeal to support an all-out strike. British Gas was a chance to draw a line in the sand, to say the union movement was not going to accept fire and rehire.”

This is fantasy dressed up as analysis. Confronted with the reality of organisations that suppress or betray every manifestation of class struggle, and which have worked hand-in-glove with the Johnson government throughout the pandemic, the SWP advances what it describes as an “effective” strategy that consists of an extended complaint that these same organisations could’ve done this, should’ve done that, but didn’t.

There is nothing of substance to distinguish between the line of the Socialist Party and the SWP on the British Gas dispute, the GMB and the trade unions. But the SP has done something even the SWP felt unable to emulate. It has responded to the GMB’s betrayal with a decision not to comment on the dispute for two whole weeks.

On April 7, the SP wrote a 150-word article, “New British Gas deadline and strike dates”, noting the plan to take a one day strike on April 14, “the new deadline set for signing new contracts being forced on workers using ‘fire and rehire’” and taking as good faith the GMB’s pledge to organise an “official national lockout dispute between British Gas and GMB, including “further strike action and action short of a strike.”

That same edition contained an article indicating why the SP was so keen not to rock the boat, “GMB general secretary election: A

fighting, socialist leadership needed”. It describes an election process where all three main candidates are seasoned bureaucrats, pointed out that the union has served as a hot bed of right-wing conspiracy against former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, and was instrumental in sabotaging previous struggles such as the 2011 national pension strike. However, once again the British Gas dispute is presented as a potential lever for a campaign to “democratise” and transform the GMB into a fighting organisation.

The GMB, the SP insisted, “with a fighting programme” and “with over 600,000 members” could have “a huge impact across the union movement, both industrially and politically. The tenacious struggle by GMB members in British Gas in taking over 40 days of strike action against fire and rehire shows the potential.”

One week later, the GMB sold out the strike. Unable to spin this as proof of the “potential” to transform the GMB, the SP chose silence as its response. It was not until April 21 that the SP charged Rob Williams of its executive committee to provide a cynical apologia for the GMB. The union is actually praised by the SP for having issued a “warning to management about any further offensive... even if workers suffer a setback, if action is taken, at least it has more chance of keeping the union intact and creates a fighting record in the workplace.”

The SP then asserts, “The union recommended that workers should sign the new contracts, to protect themselves from dismissal, but continue the action. However, this had potential risks in leaving some workers isolated, if not properly explained and members sufficiently prepared.” Not to worry, however, because, “The GMB has said that action will continue,” with the SP and other minor bureaucratic flunkys then offered up as organisers of “a national meeting of the British Gas reps and then one for the members” to “keep members together”, i.e., to maintain the stranglehold of the GMB bureaucracy.

The political efforts of the SWP and SP are directed against the initial stirrings of an insurgent movement against the union bureaucracy. But this movement will develop despite their best efforts. Workers cannot and will not reconcile themselves to organisations dedicated to suppressing their struggles and ruining their lives. The call raised by the Socialist Equality Party for the building of a network of rank and file safety and action committees as new and genuinely democratic organs of class struggle, based on the fight for socialism, will meet an ever broader and more determined response from workers facing a brutal offensive by corporate management and the government in British Gas and other industries.



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