

UK Yodel delivery drivers threaten strike action

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Anger among Yodel HGV delivery drivers has forced the GMB union to call a ballot for industrial action between August 25 and September 15. A yes vote would mean there could be strike action during the busy summer period leading up to Christmas.

On a noticeboard on its website, the GMB admits that, despite being in negotiations with Yodel management, there have been “outstanding issues from the Failure to Agree and the additional issues that arise from Yodel’s failure to settle the dispute adequately and quickly.”

After a consultative ballot in July, the union warned Yodel over the restlessness of its workforce and that if it didn’t address some grievances the GMB would not be able to suppress the demand for strike action. On July 8, the GMB published an article headlined, “Yodel faces ‘complete standstill’ as summer strike looms”.

The drivers’ complaints centre around differences in pay rates and incentives paid to agency drivers versus directly employed drivers, lack of company adherence to anchor time schedules, unworkable rotas, alterations to statutory leave, failure to implement a pay rise agreed last year, and lack of adherence to contractual obligations for shift and holiday pay.

Last autumn, Yodel workers threatened to strike over the Christmas 2020 period after the company offered a pay rise of 1.6 percent, equating to just 11 pence above the minimum wage, in 2020, and 1.5 percent in 2021.

Yodel drivers rejected this paltry offer. They had worked through the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in conditions where the company had not upheld even basic health and safety measures such as the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), even when they were delivering biohazardous COVID-19 test samples. Lorry drivers already face serious work-related health issues due to the nature of

their job, and they are especially susceptible to catching coronavirus and becoming seriously ill because of their constant interaction with the public and depot colleagues. To add insult to injury, GMB agreed a one-time, miserly COVID bonus of just £50 for drivers

To avert a strike over the Christmas season, Yodel had to agree to a 4.75 percent pay rise over two years, only slightly over the initially rejected offer and still leaving drivers on near poverty wages, especially in the Greater London area. New, directly employed drivers are hired at £9.25 per hour for 45 hours per week, working 5 days over a 7-day period.

Yodel reports that it has surpassed earnings expectations, with revenue projected at £565 million for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2021. The company added 15 new retail accounts since the beginning of the pandemic, including Hello Fresh and Gusto, and is planning to build a new “super hub” in the north of the UK to keep up with increasing demand. Yodel is the fourth-largest UK courier by parcel volume. It is owned by the billionaire Barclay brothers.

The company’s profitability is due to the hard work of its workforce, especially drivers who have been putting their lives on the line throughout the pandemic. But Yodel feels it does not have to grant any concessions to drivers, despite making bumper profits. CEO Mike Hancox remarked cynically, “We’re continuing to make significant progress during [financial year 2021]. The work of our colleagues up and down the country has been fundamental to the success that we’re seeing, and we thank them for their tireless efforts.”

The GMB is talking to drivers in the same language as management. In a letter to members, posted to the GMB website on August 8, GMB also thanked members for “bearing with us during the dispute” and

acknowledged that the union has not delivered on “promises”—including a promised pay rise that has yet to materialise.

The GMB are not fighting for the best interest of drivers, but to prevent any meaningful strike action from developing. Negotiations with Yodel take on the character of coordinating a unified attack on drivers. Their main fear is that workers will take matters into their own hands.

The GMB has proven time and again that it defends the interests of the corporations against those of the working class. In the British gas dispute against fire-and-rehire earlier this year, they imposed a sell-out deal that allowed the sacking of 500 workers with no opposition whatsoever.

Yodel’s intransigence makes it harder for the GMB to police the workforce, leading to the following warning being posted on its site:

“In a truly staggering act of corporate self-sabotage, Yodel has picked a fight with its organised LGV1 [heavy goods] drivers at exactly the moment they should be bending over backwards to make sure they are happy and stay with the business... Revenue in Yodel is up, parcel deliveries are up, new customers are coming on board. Yet Yodel want to cause trouble with the very workers that make all of that possible—at a time when they are struggling to keep hold of drivers, let alone being able to recruit new ones. It’s ridiculous behaviour and Yodel needs to see sense before it’s too late.”

GMB is worried about far more than just the situation at Yodel. They are aware that there is a growing militancy and radicalisation of workers, not just in Britain but internationally. The dispute at Yodel is only one of many in the logistics sector now developing. It takes place amid an unprecedented shortage of 100,000 lorry drivers in Britain .

There are disputes at the logistics firm GXO and Booker Retail Partners. At GXO, around 1,000 drivers at 26 UK sites are due to strike for 24 hours on August 24, followed by a second walkout on September 2. At Booker Retail Partners, 30 lorry drivers are to be balloted for industrial action over the last two weeks of August.

The Professional Drivers Protest Group, UK, a rank-and-file Facebook group with more than 4,000 members, has called for a nationwide “stay at home”

strike day on Monday August 23, an action taken independently of the GMB and other unions. The rank-and-file lorry drivers’ demands include a £15 per hour minimum wage, a 45-hour working week, time-and-a-half for overtime and double-time for Sunday work, and a penalty charge for companies that refuse drivers the use of toilet facilities. They also call for “employment rather than self-employment”, noting “if an agency can charge their customers up to £30/hour, they shouldn’t be allowed to pay drivers £11”.

This is a step in the right direction. All workers need to organise independently from the trade unions. Lorry drivers wield enormous power and can choke off the entire economy. But to act effectively, in conjunction with other sections of key workers, Yodel workers need to unite their struggles with lorry drivers nationally and internationally to build rank-and-file committees to defend their interests. Contact the Socialist Equality Party and we will do everything we can to assist in this fight to connect workers around the globe and build an International Workers Alliance of Rank -and-File Committees.



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