

UK: Unite suspends GXO driver's strike to recommend derisory pay offer

Tony Robson
25 August 2021

Strike action by around 1,000 drivers who deliver beer for breweries at GXO Logistics Drinks Ltd on Tuesday 24 August was suspended by the Unite union to recommend acceptance of a miserly revised pay offer of 4 percent.

The originally proposed pay offer to draymen by the company of 1.4 percent for 2021 was rejected earlier this month with a majority vote of 97 percent.

The strike would have massively strengthened the hand of drivers against the company. GXO delivers an estimated 40 percent of beer to pubs and hospitality venues across the UK from 26 depots, which were earmarked for the one-day stoppage.

Unite described the original pay offer as “paltry,” citing the current rate of inflation running at 3.9 percent. This has not prevented it from recommending an “improved offer” which amounts to a pay increase in real terms of 0.1 percent.

Acceptance of the revised offer will do nothing to redress the major loss in wages suffered by GXO drivers during the pandemic, with no pay increase in 2020 and an estimated £8,000 to £10,000 lost through furlough payments and lack of overtime.

Further fuelling workers anger is the scant regard for their lives shown by the company. They continue to work under the most hazardous conditions, with workplace safety measures withdrawn in line with the Conservative government's abandoning all public health precautions to contain the virus. Unite reported in July that Covid secure cleaning measures had been cut by the company, but in response it had lodged a “complaint” to be pursued separately from the pay dispute.

The decision to call off the strike was taken last Friday after Unite announced the revised offer. In addition to the cancelled one-day stoppage planned for

yesterday, further action scheduled for September 2 has been called off while Unite throws its weight behind acceptance of the meagre pay deal in a ballot which closes on August 31.

Joe Clarke, Unite's national officer for food, drink and agriculture, stated, “All industrial action has been suspended while we conduct this democratic process.” GXO drivers should vote down this rotten company-union proposal. The last “democratic process” Clarke was responsible for overseeing was at JDE in Banbury, which ended the three-month dispute against the coffee giant by 300 workers fighting the slashing of terms and conditions, including an £9,000 cut in annual wages. Unite held the ballot on the concessions agreement while the company kept the fire-and-rehire ultimatum on the table to coerce workers into acceptance.

The sabotage of the strike action at GXO by Unite occurred days prior to the “stay at home” protest organised by rank-and-file lorry drivers through the Professional Drivers Facebook Group established in March, with a membership of 4,000. It has issued a set of concrete demands, including a £15-an-hour minimum wage and 45-hour week, with its mission statement explaining, “We are the backbone of the economy. The spine and the blood. Without transport, any country would be on its knees within a few days. There is a power in that. We should unite and stand together to try to change things.”

The first action to be taken by lorry drivers to redress the decades-long undermining of their pay, terms and conditions has not come via Unite, but a grassroots movement of workers independent of the union bureaucracy. A further protest is planned for November 5.

The response of the government to the driver shortage has been Transport Secretary Grant Shapps announcing

in July the relaxation of maximum working hours, which have been hiked from 9 to 10 hours a day and allowing 11 hour shifts twice a week. This “temporary” measure has already been extended to October.

Loading extra hours on underpaid and exhausted lorry drivers was met by many angry responses on Twitter, such as, “Someone close to me is a HGV driver and he already does 60 hrs week, often 15 hr days. He is absolutely exhausted all the time. What you need to do is increase their sh**ty £11.50 hr wage by a great deal and then you may actually have more people apply.”

The response of Unite was that of a labour contractor, stating that this would not “resolve” the problem and mounting no defence of workers’ rights or call for collective action against this assault. It bemoaned the fact it would lead to more drivers leaving the industry and a further shortage in the supply of labour.

Unite issued the Unite Drivers Manifesto in late May to address recruitment and retention in road haulage. It fails to advance any concrete demands to raise wages or reduce maximum hours of work. Its central purpose is to form a corporatist body with employers and the government to police workers and curb their demands, in favour of what big business deems affordable.

The prospect of the strike at GXO was greeted by the media with headlines forecasting a “beer drought” that would stymie the government’s throwing open the economy, in which the sports and entertainment industry has served to distract public attention away from the renewed threat posed by the pandemic and abandonment of all mitigation measures.

It is a recognition that a strike by lorry drivers would incentivise other key workers to fight the government pay freeze and fuel resistance to the endless rounds of concessions demanded through the spread of fire-and-rehire contracts.

The indispensable role played by road haulage in keeping the wheels of the economy turning has fanned long-suppressed opposition to accepting poverty pay and exploitative practices. This is not unique to lorry drivers. The pandemic has provided a reality check on who is critical to the economy—the labour and expertise of millions of workers, not the corporate elite which has amassed unprecedented profits amid mass death and social suffering.

Given that logistics and transportation is thoroughly integrated into global supply chains, any strike action

would rapidly assume the character of an international struggle, breaking down divisions reinforced by the trade unions under the false flag of national unity.

Unite is balloting drivers at Booker Retail Partners Thamesmead depot, which delivers to over 1,500 convenience stores in London and the south-east. The company, run by supermarket giant Tesco, refused to pay drivers the temporary £5 an hour increase it agreed at its Hemel Hempstead depot. The GMB union is organising a ballot for strike action among Yodel HGV drivers over grievances which include a failure to honour a 4.5 percent pay increase for 2020/21, used to forestall strike action during the Christmas period last year.

Unite’s actions at GXO in recommending a miserly 4 percent pay deal shows the union’s intentions are to suppress effective action, not organise it.

GXO Logistics was formerly XPO Logistics before it was spun off in August this year with the contract logistics arm of the operations trading as a separate listed company. XPO Logistics is a Fortune 500 listed company which manages supply lines for 50,000 companies internationally, including more than 60 members in the Fortune 100. Its chief executive Brad Jacobs has a net worth of more than \$3 billion. XPO posted record earnings in logistics and transportation for the second quarter of 2021.

GXO and Yodel drivers should forge links with each other and support the initiative taken by Professional Drivers Facebook Group through the formation of rank-and-file committees. The precondition for waging a successful struggle to improve pay and conditions requires freeing themselves from the grip of pro-company unions. Only by combining their strength will it be possible to defeat the alignment of the haulage and logistics firms with the supermarket chains and the government and make inroads into the wealth accumulated by the corporate elite.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact