DHL UK lorry drivers determined to mount fightback against pay restraint and unpaid wages

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Two disputes at DHL have highlighted the growing determination of HGV drivers to mount a fightback against pay restraint and lost wages during the pandemic. The company is the largest logistics operator in the world—employing 41,000 workers in the UK, a tenth of its 400,000-strong global workforce—whose parent company made a record €1.3 billion profit in the first half of the year.

200 HGV drivers employed by DHL and based at the regional distribution centre for the giant supermarket chain Sainsbury's returned a resounding mandate for strike action on August 25, voting 98 percent in favour.

The workers rejected a derisory 1 percent pay offer, way below the rate of inflation. Unite the union organised the vote as a consultative ballot, which is non-binding, and has announced that it will now take steps towards a strike ballot.

Unite regional officer Phil Silkstone stated, "Unless Sainsbury's and DHL, both of which run extremely healthy profit margins, get their acts together there will be empty shelves in Sainsbury's stores across London and the South East of England."

"That possibility can be avoided by coming up with an offer that reflects the hard work and dedication shown by these drivers."

The question should be asked, if Unite is so determined to establish a pay settlement which rewards workers appropriately then why has it not stated what its negotiating position is and the increase it is demanding? The union avoids the subject to give the company free rein to put forward another rotten offer, which Unite can then tout as a victory.

DHL drivers should look to the experience of 1,000 GXO drivers whose planned strike was suspended at the last minute by Unite, which recommended a 4 percent pay offer—in effect a 0.1 percent increase, against the Retail Prices Index (RPI) inflation rate of 3.9 percent. The agreement did nothing to compensate for lost wages during the pandemic, including no pay increase for 2020. Knowing the union would resist any attempt to continue the struggle, the workers voted to accept on Thursday.

In a separate dispute, Unite announced it was preparing a strike ballot in August of 2,000 members at Jaguar Land Rover plants in Merseyside and the West Midlands at Halewood, Castle Bromwich, Solihull, Tyrefort, Midpoint and Hams Hall. The union said this was in response to "an insulting pay offer" and underpayments of wages to hundreds of drivers and warehouse workers through "flexible furlough". It estimates some staff are owed arrears of up to £800.

The arrears "debacle"—as Unite has described it—could not have arisen without the close collaboration between the unions and the employers throughout the pandemic. The furlough scheme, touted as a safety net for workers brought about by the unions, was a massive government handout to the employers, allowing wages to be cut by 20 percent. Flexible furlough gave companies even more license, allowing them to bring workers on at full wages for any number of hours a week and throw them back onto furlough when it suited them. The example of DHL shows how even the wealthiest corporations grabbed the opportunity to swindle workers out of their income with both hands.

What really alarms Unite is not rampant corporate greed and the theft of workers' wages but the response this threatens to provoke in the working class.

National Officer Matt Draper pleaded with the company, "If it wants to avoid serious industrial unrest, DHL needs to pay the wages it owes, as well as putting forward a pay offer that isn't a slap in the face for an already disgruntled workforce."

The unions know that this section of the working class is a tinderbox. There is an estimated shortage of over 70,000 HGV drivers, out of an overall workforce of 320,000. The heavily exploited workers are demanding increased pay, a shorter working week and secure employment, bringing them into conflict with the ruling elite who intend to safeguard profits at all costs.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government has responded to the crisis by lengthening HGV drivers' maximum daily hours from nine to 10 hours daily and 11 hours twice a week. Introduced in July, the measure has already been extended to October. The government has also placed the army on standby, not only to ensure the transport of goods and supplies but in anticipation of a major confrontation with the working class.

The *Financial Times* (*FT*) notes that while Brexit has compounded the shortage of workers— European Union (EU) drivers have been relied on to work for low wages—and the pandemic has led to a backlog of new drivers seeking to obtain licenses, the underlying factors are more systemic.

In an article titled "UK truck driver shortage signals a broken market", Sarah O'Connor explains that that low pay and onerous flexible working patterns have become endemic. O'Connor's article only considered the last 15 years, minimising the scale of the decline in working conditions, but the examples given nonetheless paint a devastating picture.

The *FT* cited figures compiled by the Office of National Statistics showing that the gap between the median lorry driver's wage and the wage for a supermarket cashier has declined substantially since 2010, from 51 percent to 27 percent. The current lorry driver's median hourly wage is £11.80, compared to a supermarket cashier at £11.30.

The article also pointed to job adverts by logistics firms which required recruits to work 45 hours a week and work any five days between Monday to Sunday with shift patterns changed at late notice and work schedules starting early in the morning and continuing through the night.

Scapegoating EU drivers for bringing down labour costs, the FT touted the example of the Netherlands in which collective agreements between the union and employers had establish a "floor" on pay and conditions across the sector. The paper cited favourably the comments from Adrian Jones—Unite's national officer for road transport—that the shortage of labour could now become a moment of "leverage" to establish long-term "reforms" along the lines of the Netherlands.

Workers should take this endorsement of Unite and the unions by the mouthpiece of British capital as a warning. The FT has backed the social onslaught against the working class from Thatcher and Blair onwards and insisted that nothing be allowed to "undo" the " Thatcherite revolution of the 1980s ," which, "while often brutal, led to a necessary shift in the balance of power between labour and capital that helped deliver stronger economic growth".

The unions have since undergone such a thoroughgoing degeneration into a labour police force on behalf of management that the FT now considers them an important tool for the defence of the ill-gotten gains of the super-rich against a rising tide of class struggle.

To that end, Unite produced its Unite Drivers' Manifesto in late May, aiming to win the backing of employers and the government for a national council which will oversee collective bargaining arrangements for drivers, just 15 percent of whom are unionised. Deliberately vague on wage demands or reductions in maximum hours of work, its central purpose is to form a corporatist body to police workers and curb their demands, in favour of what big business deems affordable.

The unions will have been particularly alarmed by the formation of the rank-and-file 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. The group arranged a "stay at home" protest on August 23 and is planning a larger protest for November 5.

HGV drivers, like all sections of workers, face a fight on two fronts—against the employers and government on the one hand, and their agents in the pro-company unions on the other. DHL drivers should establish a rank-file-committee to forge links with their allies at GXO and Yodel and in the Professional Drivers Facebook Group. They require not only an industrial strategy but a political perspective to defeat the powerful logistics and supermarket monopolies and their political representatives in the Johnson government and its de facto coalition partner, the Labour Party.