

Planned strikes by DHL workers in UK as Unite seek to block national action

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More than 2,000 DHL logistics workers who sort and deliver components to Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) plants have given “strong backing” for industrial action over pay.

A strike would directly threaten car production at West Midland JLR sites at Solihull, Castle Bromwich, Hams Hall and Midpoint, Tyrefort, as well as Halewood in Merseyside.

The workers had already rejected a pathetic 1.75 percent pay offer to cover the two-and-a-half years from 2020 by a margin of 96 percent. RPI inflation is already running at 6 percent.

Drivers and warehouse staff clashed with the company earlier this year over its abuse of the Job Retention Scheme’s furlough payments.

DHL had used the “flexible furlough” scheme during the pandemic, enabling businesses to bring back furloughed employees on a part-time basis and still receive government payment for some of their wages. In August, reports emerged of hundreds of workers having been underpaid, owed as much as £800.

The same month, *Birmingham Live* received accounts from anonymous former employees at DHL warehouses cataloguing what one called a “bully culture.” One worker said: “We worked throughout the pandemic. They won the new contract because of us. But there is no appreciation. There’s a bully culture here by senior management. It is their way or no way.

“Toilet breaks are timed... There have been instances where employees have been stopped by a senior manager who stood by the toilet and told them to go on their break...

“There was a massive uproar about people who work for Amazon. It’s exactly the same here.”

In October, the company sent letters out to hundreds of other workers announcing that up to 10 percent of

their wages would be docked each month from November to next September due to furlough “overpayments”.

DHL is also facing strike action in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

In Scotland, around 90 drivers and warehouse workers based in Bellshill, near Glasgow have rejected an offer of 9 percent over two years because it did not address the “poverty pay” experienced by the workers earning on average £12.50 an hour. Workers are also in dispute with DHL over the failure to improve drivers’ working hours, among other terms and conditions.

At the Bombardier (now Spirit AeroSystems) Wing Logistics Hub in Belfast, a ballot of DHL workers returned a 100 percent vote in favour of strike action over poverty pay and poor conditions. The Unite union reported that staff earn an hourly rate of £9.24, with “some of the longest hours and enjoy the least holidays”.

Workers are determined to take on DHL, the largest logistics company in the world employing 41,000 workers in the UK, a tenth of its 400,000-strong global workforce. Its parent company made a record €1.3 billion profit in the first half of this year. The workers are in a powerful position to do so, forming a vital link in industrial and food supply chains in conditions of a very tight labour market.

However, they face a determined opponent in the Unite union which is working to throttle this movement on behalf of employers they have worked to protect for decades.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham made much of the fact that DHL workers at JLR had not received a pay rise since 2018. But this is thanks to the union’s past record in enforcing the dictates of management.

Unite did not lift a finger in August last year when

DHL sacked over 1,200 workers in its JLR operations, saying only that they would try to keep job losses “to an absolute minimum”.

Confronted with a growing rebellion in the workforce, driven by the pressures of rising inflation and the experience of intense exploitation throughout the pandemic, Unite is seeking to delay and isolate disputes to prevent the development of a full-scale movement across DHL’s 40,000-strong national workforce.

The JLR fight has been dragged out for months. A dispute over pay was first raised in March 2020. It returned this August in the context of the conflict over furlough payments, with Unite announcing that it would “now begin the process of balloting its more than 2,000 DHL members”. More than two months later, on October 20, after talks with the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS), the union announced a ballot for industrial action closing November 15.

Unite has not even released the ballot result, admitting only that the membership has given “strong backing”. The union immediately returned to backroom talks with the employers at ACAS.

At Bellshill, Unite again sought to bury the dispute. After DHL’s initial offer was refused, the union entered talks and presented an “improved offer” (details undisclosed) to its membership. This was rejected by an 88 percent vote, on a 95 percent turnout. Announcing the result on November 17, the union gave no details of proposed strike action, but declared it would be re-entering talks with ACAS the next day.

Not a trace can be found of the dispute in Northern Ireland.

Every effort is made to keep disputes separate, despite all the workers involved being employed by the same company and facing the same issues.

Two other DHL strikes were taken off the table earlier this year.

A strike of 200 DHL lorry drivers at Sainsbury’s regional distribution centre for London and the South East in Dartford was called off in October after workers accepted a 6.2 percent pay increase. This settlement reflects the pressures being put on employers by the shortage of HGV drivers and points to what more would be possible without the union’s sabotaging a broader fight.

It made even more galling the sellout deal at DHL’s Croxteth, Liverpool plant this February, where 120 warehouse workers who had struck for a total of 10 days received a below-inflation 3 percent pay deal for 2021, and a one-off £75 payment.

Unite is following the same playbook used to demobilise the struggles of bus drivers, at Stagecoach, Arriva and the London operators. Faced with a growing fightback over pay and conditions, it divides workers from each other and as far as possible prevents them mobilising in strike action, creating the best conditions to enforce minimal pay offers.

To fight back, DHL workers need their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the company unions. Through these committees they can reach out to their co-workers in other parts of the country and internationally, and to other workers in their sector, to organise a fight for improved pay and conditions all along the line.

Logistics workers the world over, from Australia to the United States, are engaged in a struggle. They have their hands on the chokepoints of the world economy. They must use this strength to fight for demands based not on what the employers say they can afford, but on the needs of workers and their families.



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