

UK: B&Q warehouse workers in east Midlands to take strike action against low pay

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25 November 2021

Warehouse workers at the B&Q distribution centre in Worksop in the east Midlands are due to begin industrial action for a pay increase from November 28. The workers are employed directly by logistics firm Wincanton Ltd.

The strike action involves more than 400 members of the Unite union and begins from Sunday with a weeklong strike followed by a seven-day overtime ban, with this two-week cycle scheduled to run until February 20 next year.

A 95.9 percent majority was returned in favour of strike action on November 10. An earlier consultative ballot returned an 89 percent majority.

Unite has dragged out negotiations with Wincanton throughout the year, keeping the initiative with the company and allowing it to come back with one insulting pay offer after another, starting at 2 percent, then revised to 4 percent with the demand that workers lose their first three days of sick pay. Unite countered that it had already agreed this concession. The 4 percent offer, tabled again without strings attached, was subsequently rejected by 88 percent of the workforce.

The basic hourly rate for a shopfloor worker is just £9.96 an hour, not even a pound above the current minimum wage of £8.91 due to be uplifted next April to £9.50.

The union's November 10 press release on the strike states that Worksop depot workers members expect "a pay rise that reflects the rising cost of living"—inflation is now topping 6 percent. But Unite does not present a concrete pay demand. Its statement also fails to address basic facts of the dispute like the miserly character of the company's pay offers, or the poverty-level pay and heavy exploitation endured by workers at the site.

The strike will be the first at the Worksop distribution centre since it opened in 2005, despite its long history of low wages and poor conditions. These problems have intensified during the pandemic as both B&Q and

Wincanton racked up profits. B&Q sells DIY products and garden furniture but was exempted from the lockdown last March as an "essential business."

Summing up the rejection of the Dickensian levels of exploitation which have been allowed to flourish, an anonymous worker at the distribution centre told the *Worksop Guardian*, "We've worked all way through COVID-19 and received nothing but a free slice of pizza and a bacon cob. [It] feels like we're not valued. We're only asking for the rise we deserve."

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has stated in addition that the strike is in response to "union-busting," accusing Wincanton of launching unjustified disciplinarys against union reps and reducing facility time to conduct union duties. However, there is no attempt to explain the frame-up charges or demand that they are dropped immediately. Neither does the union refer to the fact that this constitutes an attack on the rights of the entire workforce.

Unite has likewise remained silent on threatening letters received by its members from Wincanton management. The first on October 25, as workers were being balloted, stated that strike action was deemed "a breach of contract," only adding that "you are protected by law during a strike which is lawfully organised."

The second on November 17 reiterated that workers who took strike action could face having those days deducted from their length of service, affecting their pension and redundancy entitlements. Wincanton management made it clear that the picket lines would be heavily scrutinised for any action which could be deemed contrary to its code of conduct, in a veiled threat of disciplinary action. This included warning against speaking to people, distributing leaflets or using banners and placards. A final threat was made that failure to comply with the draconian law of only six people on a picket line would be treated as a criminal offence by the

police.

Any genuine workers' organisation involved in a fight would have exposed this blatant act of intimidation. Instead, the approach of Unite has been one of conciliation, promoting the idea that the company can be won over through moral persuasion, and of emphasising its role as a corporate partner, claiming that "everyone" has an interest in preventing a strike.

In fact, the massive vote for strike action at B&Q is fuelled by a growing conflict between workers and corporations which have treated them with contempt throughout the pandemic. This is the result of a policy of profit over lives pursued consciously by the Johnson government and big business in collaboration with trade unions and Labour Party.

In the name of the "national interest", the government provided the green light for non-essential business to operate during the pandemic, awarding a free pass to the latter-day robber barons Amazon, JD Sports, ASOS, Boohoo and Pretty Little Thing, whose workplaces even before COVID-19 were notorious sweatshops.

The pandemic profiteers have been allowed to continue to make fortunes off the backs of workers herded into overcrowded workplaces to meet the increased demand for online purchasing. Workers were offered little or no protection as infections spread, with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) failing to prosecute a single employer for safety breaches as workplace deaths rose. This was sanctioned by the Trades Union Congress, which issued a tripartite statement with the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and the HSE.

B&Q kept its distribution centres working as online orders of DIY products surged during the lockdowns. Its multinational parent company Kingfisher PLC recorded profits in the first half of this year of £669 million from B&Q and hardware retailer Screwfix. It plans to return £300 million to shareholders through a share buyback programme "reflecting strong cash generation and confidence in outlook." The company's share price rose 36 percent in the last year, compared to a gain of 19 percent for the wider FTSE 100.

Wincanton Ltd operates supply chains for Asda, Screwfix, Morrisons and other major retail giants across 200 sites. According to Unite, Wincanton made profits of £47.2 million during 2020. It's pre-tax profits for the first half of this financial year increased by 31.4 percent.

Workers should reject appeals directed to management and instead turn for support to the working class. If Unite proves incapable of preventing the strike from going

ahead it will seek to impose its isolation and wear down resistance.

A worker at the Worksop distribution centre pointed out to the WSWs that workers at the other B&Q distributions centres were not being mobilised in a collective fight over pay: "Unite is allowing a divide and rule policy."

Even within the facility at Worksop, a pay dispute by HGV drivers employed by XPO Logistics, and represented by Unite, is being treated as a separate issue by the union.

Workers should reject these artificial divisions which undermine a joint fight. If it were not for the role of Graham and Unite, the Johnson government and the corporations would by now be facing a strike wave by HGV and bus drivers to defeat poverty pay and the driving down of conditions.

This underscores the necessity of forming rank-and-file committees to take the fight out of the hands of Unite and mobilise workers as one force against all the companies that share in their exploitation. The problems they confront are essentially no different from workers around the world whose experience of the pandemic mirrors their own, with workers' lives treated as expendable and exploitation intensified.

Their position in a globalised system of production places workers in a powerful position for a fightback, provided they are industrially and politically unified. Such a struggle can only be waged by breaking out of the straitjacket of the trade unions which function ever more openly in opposition to workers' direct interests, as an extended arm of management, the corporations and the government.

We encourage all workers to study the statement of the International Workers Alliance for Rank-and-File Committees and contact the SEP to discuss how to build this movement.



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