

“All they’re bothered about is profits.”

UK: Striking workers at B&Q distribution centre in Worksop determined to fight pay restraint

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3 December 2021

Around 400 warehouse workers at the B&Q distribution centre in Worksop in the East Midlands have been on the picket line since last Sunday in a weeklong strike against low pay.

The action by members of Unite has hit Wincanton Ltd, the logistics firm which directly employs workers in the warehouse, a major regional distribution hub for B&Q. Workers on the shopfloor are paid a basic salary of £9.96 an hour and rejected the last revised 4 percent pay offer, voting to strike by a 95.6 percent majority.

The determined mood was evident on the picket lines throughout the week with dozens of workers turning out. This was in defiance of intimidation by management in letters addressed to the workforce. This included implied threats of disciplinary measures, reductions in entitlements and possible police action unless they adhered to the stringent legal requirements of just six strikers on the picket line.

Unite has stated the dispute is also over union busting by Wincanton Ltd, citing examples of disciplinary action against union reps and reduction in facility time to conduct union duties. However, it has failed to publicly report the steps taken by the company to clampdown on the strike and workers’ rights to organise.

The union, with over 1 million members, has not organised any form of solidarity action, even at the other major B&Q hubs in Swindon and Doncaster in England and Cambuslang in Scotland in defence of their co-workers in Worksop.

The resistance by workers has been sparked by the pay offer, well below the increasing rate of inflation

now standing at 6 percent. This has fed into a deeper sense of injustice, informed by the pandemic. Both B&Q and Wincanton have reaped massive profits by keeping workers on the job at risk of infection while they are denied a pay award which even keeps pace with the rising cost of living.

The WSWS spoke to strikers, with one pointing to the distribution centre over the road commenting, “All they’re bothered about is profits.” Another said, “We were classed as essential workers, but they were selling plant pots (during the lockdown).”

B&Q was exempt from the national lockdown last March even though its sales come from the retail of DIY products, garden equipment and furniture. The free pass it was awarded was on the pretext that it sold hardware. This was part of a wider exemption granted by the Johnson government to giant corporations involved in e-commerce of non-essential goods, which includes Amazon, JD Sports, ASOS, Boohoo and Pretty Little Thing. Unite at B&Q organised no action against this, as was the case by all the other unions such as the GMB, Community and USDAW where they represent workers in overcrowded workplaces already notorious for their sweatshop conditions.

Unite has been forced into a temporary stance of opposition at the B&Q depot in Worksop, after coming back with one insulting offer after another from the company having never formally stated a pay demand of its own.

In the run-up to the seven-day stoppage Unite claimed that “everyone” had an interest in preventing a strike, signalling its commitment to a continued

partnership with Wincanton, which it claimed could be convinced through appeals to reason.

The strike action has since been undermined by Unite. The walkout by distribution workers has impacted on the company at a vulnerable time in the run-up to Christmas. However, it could not have maintained any operations over the past week based upon a skeleton staff it has assembled on the warehouse floor without the trucks leaving the depot, and that has been ensured by the union. The HGV drivers are also members of Unite and are in a pay dispute, but they have not been called out as the union has treated their fight as a separate battle on the pretext that they are employed by XPO Logistics.

This is a snapshot of the role of Unite under General Secretary Sharon Graham. An unprecedented number of strikes have been called off in favour of below inflation agreements, particularly on the buses and among HGV drivers. The notable exceptions of pay rises above inflation are for services rendered by the union bureaucracy in preventing a national strike movement and owe far more to the labour shortage threatening supply chains.

The essential task for the union bureaucracy is to prevent the working class from taking advantage of the crisis facing the Johnson government and employers and clawing back what it has lost over decades.

Only this week Unite has ensured that over 1,000 workers in two major distributions centres for the supermarket giant Morrisons will not strike over pay. The workers at the sites in Northwich in Cheshire and Wakefield in west Yorkshire were in the process of balloting for strike action over a pay offer of 3 percent and only 2 percent for the lowest paid. Morrisons has been at the centre of major outbreaks of infections at its distribution centres, including its sprawling site in Bridgwater in Somerset employing 3,000 workers, which reportedly claimed the lives of two workers last year.

Unite has hailed the revised 5 percent offer accepted in Cheshire and Wakefield and celebrated the fact that it has averted strike action. Graham had the front to repeat her mantra that the deal shows that Unite “does exactly what it says on the trade union tin” after she has publicly stated that pay rises would need to be 6 percent to keep up with inflation.

The strike at the Worksop distribution hub ends on

Saturday and workers will return to the shop floor based upon a seven-day overtime ban to be followed by a further weeklong strike. The alternating industrial action is scheduled to continue until February next year, demonstrating the commitment by workers to defeat the pay restraint.

Unite cannot be left in charge of the fight over pay and the clampdown against workers’ rights by Wincanton. Workers need to form a rank-and-file committee to link their fight with HGV drivers at the site and appeal to their co-workers at other B&Q distribution centres to stand together. The fight for a genuine pay increase cannot be based on moral appeals to the company. There are no shared interests between the workforce and the company boardroom and shareholders.

On the picket line strikers were keen to listen to the WSWS team explain how their struggles could be unified with their co-workers across the distribution and logistics sector against the pandemic profiteers in the UK and internationally. We encourage workers to read and share the statement for the building of the International Workers Alliance for Rank and File Committees and contact the WSWS to discuss how this movement can be built.



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