

Fast food delivery drivers in Sheffield, UK strike against Stuart deliveries, Just Eat

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Just Eat fast food delivery drivers in Sheffield began a week of strike action from Monday against a 25 percent cut in pay from £4.50 to £3.40 for most deliveries, imposed by subcontractor, Stuart.

This is a savage attack on workers already earning less than the minimum wage. The workers are members of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB).

In taking strike action the couriers in Sheffield are taking a stand against the dictates of both Just Eat (with over 450,000 delivery riders) and Stuart, which is part of the transnational DPD Group with (with at least 48,000 employees).

The strike by Stuart drivers has resonated widely as the conditions they are fighting against are a sharp expression of a general offensive waged by big business against the working class. An online Strike Hardship Fund has raised £3,870.

The number of people working for gig economy platforms has tripled in the last five years in England and Wales. Among working adults those working on gig economy platforms at least once a week has increased from 5.8 percent in 2016 to 14.7 percent today.

Major employers have used the pandemic to tear up established pay, terms and conditions with one in 10 workers having experienced fire and rehire practices to impose new and inferior contracts. The rate to which casualisation has been extended is shown in just one local example in Higher Education, with 800 lecturers at Hallam University in Sheffield on zero-hour contracts.

The development of new technology is being used to intensify the rate of exploitation and guarantee ever greater fortunes to the corporate elite. This takes an entirely parasitic form in relation to fast food delivery.

Stuart deliveries only involvement in the provision of the service is the “app” used to connect the orders from customers to the workers performing the deliveries, for which they deduct half the fee paid. Stuart workers are denied basic entitlements such as sick pay and have to meet the costs for their own vehicle maintenance, insurance and fuel. The pittance they receive for their work will be further reduced through rising petrol prices and a rate of inflation standing at 6 percent.

Just Eat Takeaway (JET) made £2.1 billion revenue in 2020, a 61 percent year-on-year increase. Just Eat grew quickly since it was founded in Denmark in 2001, and JET has become one of the biggest fast food delivery services outside of China. It has done this mainly through acquisitions of its rivals, in the process accumulating debts of over £130 million. JET has for over a year been promising to take its delivery workers in-house rather than relying on contractors such as Stuart. No such changes have been made in the UK and if changes are made, it will be to take the most profitable areas of Stuart's business (in London for instance) as part of its expansion plans.

Just Eat have tried to distance themselves from the pay cut by Stuart, saying they have no control over what it pays its couriers. This Pontius Pilate act is a fraud as both companies are claiming their pound of flesh from super-exploited workers.

The delivery workers are aware that they are being used mercilessly. One told WSWS reporters, “There's more drivers than before. They [the company bosses] are making billions but they're sitting on it. They should pay us what we deserve. We risk our lives with Covid and with the icy conditions.”

Bryn said, “In the pandemic, we learnt that the key workers were also the lowest paid workers. If all the billionaires stopped working tomorrow, the world

wouldn't even notice. Workers need to realise that each raindrop DOES contribute to the flood. If the gig workers realised this, they'd be encouraged."

Bryn recounted his experiences in other jobs that made him aware that all capitalists try to get as much as they can out of their workers and give as little back as possible. He compared the levels of inequality today with dystopian novels like "1984". He explained that there are huge costs involved as they have to pay for cars, fuel and insurance, meaning that pay works out at below the minimum wage.

Online comments by other workers at DPD show a similar level of anger, summed up by a worker's advice given to anyone considering working for them: "Unless you're desperate avoid at all costs!"

The IWGB presents itself as an independent grassroots union which organises the most exploited and largely migrant sections of workers and stands outside the larger more established trade unions.

The demands it has addressed in relation to the strike in no way resolve the precarious and exploitative conditions confronting Stuart workers or offers a strategy to mobilise broader support from the working class. This would entail a fight against the labour and trade union bureaucracy, to which the IWGB is orientated.

In conjunction with Sheffield Trades Council and the Labour Party, it has issued a pay demand of £6 per delivery and payment of waiting times at £15 per hour after 10 minutes. A Stuart delivery driver showed the WSWS his payments, which revealed that he had been given only three deliveries on three days of his working week.

The trade unions and Labour Party cannot even rouse themselves to call for an outlawing of Stuart deliveries' practices and demand drivers are guaranteed a basic income.

At the rally outside Sheffield Town Hall organised by the IWGB, local Labour MP Olivia Blake was given top billing. Her comments were confined to presenting Stuart workers as humble petitioners to the corporate powers. She stated, "Stuart couriers have helped keep Sheffield going through the pandemic. For them to be rewarded with a pay cut like this is unacceptable. Every worker deserves a living wage, job security, and proper employments rights. I hope that Both Stuart and Just Eat do the right thing and give their delivery workers a

pay rise, not a pay cut."

The notion that Just Eat and Stuart will reward workers out of a sense of social responsibility is transparent nonsense, aimed at nipping social opposition in the bud. The pandemic profiteers have been able to increase their wealth while workers have been exposed to the risk of infection and death for fear of losing their only income and livelihood.

Rather than allies of Stuart workers, the Labour Party and the trade unions are doing everything they can to prevent strikes, suppress the class struggle and keep the viciously right-wing Conservative government of Boris Johnson in power as they make unprecedented attacks on the working class.

Labour and the unions are no less determined than the Tories to keep workers on the job during the deadly COVID pandemic, to recoup the billions given to the biggest corporations in government handouts. This means forcing millions of workers to remain on the job in workplaces that are the main vectors for transmission of the virus, as well as keeping schools open even as the lie that children are less affected is tragically refuted.

The unity and solidarity which Stuart delivery drivers need in their fight is not represented by the hollow declarations from the labour and trade union bureaucracy, but must be fought for in the working class, among the millions coming into conflict with these defenders of the corporate and financial elite.



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