

Unite betrays UK Tesco workers strike, USDAW plans company talks

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The trade unions are systematically sabotaging a strike movement of supermarket distribution workers in the UK. Yesterday, the Unite union called off industrial action planned for next week by 1,200 Tesco staff to ballot its members on a new totally inadequate company pay offer.

In the last month, votes have been held or scheduled among more than 14,000 workers across Tesco, Morrisons and Asda—three of the four largest British supermarkets. The votes are an expression of the determination to fight that exists among distribution workers and created the basis for mass industrial action over the critical Christmas period.

On Monday, 6,200 Tesco distribution centre workers represented by Unite and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) returned a vote for strike action later this month, after rejecting a below-inflation four percent pay offer. Over 1,000 Morrisons workers were balloted in November over an even lower 2-3 percent offer. Yesterday, the GMB union announced a consultative ballot closing December 20 of 7,000 Asda distribution workers after an insulting zero percent “pay offer” was rejected.

These effective pay cuts deepen the exploitation of employees cynically lauded as key workers during the pandemic, kept in work in unsafe conditions throughout earlier lockdowns.

A COVID outbreak was reported at Tesco’s Livingstone distribution centre in September last year, and 200 workers at the same warehouse were asked to self-isolate this July. The *World Socialist Web Site* reported on similar conditions faced by Morrisons’s warehouse staff last year, at a centre run by DHL, with multiple infections and deaths reported. Infections were also reported in Asda’s Avonmouth distribution centre and the Kober food processing plant owned by the company.

Outbreaks among warehouse workers have been shrouded in secrecy, so this is likely a very incomplete

picture.

The continued full operation of their warehouses has enabled these companies to maintain huge profits. Asda made an operating profit of £486.5 million in 2020.

Morrisons reported a £105 million pre-tax profit for the first half of this year and the company made £201 million profit before tax in 2020/21, with £261m being paid out in shareholder dividends. In October 2021, its shareholders approved a £7bn take-over deal by US private equity group Clayton, Dubilier & Rice (CD&R), resulting in a £10 million payout for CEO David Potts and £4 million for finance director Trevor Strain.

These new owners will want their pound of flesh, having paid a 61 percent premium on Morrisons’ share value. CD&R is engaged in a longstanding legal dispute with US company Culligan, who allege CD&R siphoned £415 million from the company in dividends, payment and fees. In 2013, CD&R bought a 60 percent stake in John Deere Landscapes. Deere workers in the US recently ended a five-week strike over pay and working conditions after a fierce struggle with the employers and the UAW union.

Tesco’s pre-tax profit for the first half of this year was £1.1 billion, double the figure for the same period last year. It expects to make a total operating profit this year of £2.6 billion. In 2020, Tesco made a £5 billion special dividend payment to shareholders after selling its businesses in Asia. The company specifically cited its ability to “leverage our strong supplier relationships and distribution capability” as a reason for its success.

Management therefore responded viciously to the planned strike of distribution workers, sending letters to employees threatening the removal of planned bonuses and the sack.

Tesco’s UK Distribution and Fulfilment Director Andrew Woolfenden wrote, “If you decide to take part in strike action you will be in breach of your contract of

employment. This means that you will not be paid for the entire shift(s) in which strike action is taken, even if you work for part of that shift. You may not be paid your colleague bonus for 2021. The average payment under that scheme last year was £801. You may lose your warehouse market supplement (up to £500) or driver market supplement (up to £800).”

These threats are made to workers so poorly paid that one employee told *The Grocer*, “It’s coming to the point now where I have colleagues having to claim Universal Credit to make ends meet. That’s unacceptable in the 21st century. Especially when you’re working for a multimillion-pound company.”

Workers have also been told that if the strike action continues for 12 weeks, Tesco “may decide to terminate your employment with the company.”

By far the biggest threat to the strikers, however, has proved to be the corporatist unions, which operate as partners with management and have helped enforce the low-wage conditions that prevail in the sector.

The Morrisons dispute has already been sold out. One day before the November ballot was due to close, Unite announced that a 5 percent, below inflation, pay deal had been reached and cancelled any action. This was done even as 2,300 Morrisons shop floor workers proceed with an equal pay dispute challenging unequal rates between themselves and the company’s warehouse workers, which would have created the basis for a joint fight.

The GMB’s use of a consultative ballot to delay action by Asda workers means any strike will be postponed till the New Year.

Having removed Morrisons and Asda workers from the equation this December, Unite and USDAW have set about dividing and demobilising the Tesco strikers. They have recent form when it comes to using the division of workers across unions to reduce the impact of industrial action.

Between them representing 13 of Tesco’s 22 distribution centres, neither made an appeal to the nine others to join the fight, or to any of the company’s 300,000 other workers in the UK.

Within days of the strikes being announced, *The Grocer* reported yesterday morning that Unite and USDAW “agreed to renew pay talks” with Tesco. USDAW national officer Joanne McGuinness said, “We welcome Tesco’s offer of further talks, which start tomorrow, and we will engage positively to seek a resolution to this dispute.”

Neither union made any specific pay demand. Unite

General Secretary Sharon Graham advised that Tesco “should be making our members a decent pay offer.” McGuinness asked the company to “return to the negotiating table with a better deal that is acceptable to our members.” They avoid naming a figure to give themselves room to present the inevitable concession as a “victory,” just as with the Morrisons deal.

It was not long in coming. Yesterday afternoon, Unite suspended its Tesco strike at four distribution centres in Didcot, Doncaster, Antrim and Belfast and announced a new pay offer of 5.5 percent backdated to July 2021 and an additional 0.5 percent from February 2022. The union is recommending its members accept the deal, which still struggles even to keep up with inflation. Negotiations are still ongoing at the Livingstone centre in Scotland.

The betrayal paves the way for the same to be carried out by USDAW, whose 5,000 members are still scheduled to strike at another nine distribution centres from December 20 to December 24. The union is due to meet with the company on Monday.

Unite members should reject the union’s sellout deal. The strike votes of supermarket distribution workers, as well as of Wincanton/B&Q and Clarks warehouse employees and DHL drivers, reflect a growing militancy among logistics workers. They are rebelling against companies which profited hugely off their exploitation throughout nearly two years of a raging pandemic.

To succeed, this struggle must be taken out of the hands of the unions by rank-and-file committees independent of the bureaucracy. These organisations will lead the resistance to the union’s sellouts and betrayals and fight to spread the strike across the entire company, industry and wider working class.



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