

B&Q distribution centre workers in Worksop, UK stage second week of strike action

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Over 400 warehouse workers at the B&Q distribution centre in Worksop in the East Midlands took to the picket line last Sunday in a second round of seven-day strike action. The first week of strikes took place at the beginning of this month by the members of Unite, who are directly employed by Wincanton Logistics Ltd.

Warehouse workers rejected a 4 percent pay offer from Wincanton, which has not made any improved offer since strike action started, with the inflation rate now increasing from 6 to 7.1 percent.

The response of the company to the first strike at the distribution centre since it opened in 2005 has been intimidation. Letters have been sent by management to all employees taking part containing implicit threats of disciplinary action, reductions in entitlements and police action over picketing.

The *World Socialist Web Site* was informed by workers on the picket line Sunday that when they returned to work after last week's strike some received detrimental treatment from managers on the shopfloor. Managers have been brought in from other B&Q distribution centres, placing workers under constant surveillance.

The hostile environment created by Wincanton has only made workers more determined than ever to fight back. They have voted to escalate the dispute from alternating weeks of strike action followed by an overtime ban to continuous strike action from Christmas Eve.

This resistance reflects a broader shift in consciousness and a determination to fight, which has been influenced by the experience of the pandemic. Workers across the logistics and distribution sector are no longer prepared to tolerate low pay. The basic hourly rate at Worksop is just £9.96 an hour. Workers know that Wincanton and Kingfisher, the parent

company of B&Q, have amassed huge profits from their labour performed under conditions in which their lives and health have been placed at risk. The pre-tax profits of Wincanton for the first half of this year were £27.3 million, up 42 percent, while Kingfisher posted pre-tax profits of £736 million in the year up to March 2021, a massive 634 percent increase.

B&Q was given a free pass by the Johnson government to remain open even during the national lock down last year, as were other non-essential businesses already notorious for running low-paid sweatshops, such as Amazon, ASOS and JD Sports.

Unite issued a press release on December 9 which explained, "Pay is so low at the warehouse that last year the local Unite branch was forced to set up a hardship fund, providing emergency grants and zero percent loans, to help struggling staff. Many Unite members have had to access food banks because they can't make ends meet on their poverty."

After making these damning disclosures, Unite cannot bring itself to even state a pay demand. According to workers on the picket line, the membership of Unite voted at a mass meeting for a pay demand of 6 percent at a time when inflation was 4.5 percent. Unite has not even publicly acknowledged this demand. General Secretary Sharon Graham talks about rectifying "poverty pay" and Unite regional official Garry Guye refers to Wincanton "tabling a reasonable offer."

The evasive language is deliberate as Unite under Graham has in every other pay dispute portrayed any revised offer as a "victory". This has been to block a strike wave by thousands of workers across key sections of the economy.

Unite's position is no less fraudulent in relation to its claim of opposing union busting. It has done nothing to

draw to the attention of its 1.4 million membership the methods employed by Wincanton to threaten and intimidate workers. It has made no appeal for solidarity to other B&Q regional distribution hubs in Swindon, and Doncaster in England and Cambuslang in Scotland.

B&Q would not be in a position to operate at all during the strike if the HGV drivers at the Worksop distribution centre, who are members of Unite, came out over their pay dispute. The union has treated the HGV drivers' dispute as if it belongs in some parallel universe rather than unify co-workers in the same distribution centre. They are stringing out the negotiations with GXO Logistics and preventing a decisive second front from being opened against pay restraint.

After Wincanton workers voted for indefinite strike action, Unite senior rep Pat McGrath made a plaintiff appeal to B&Q and Wincanton, "All we are asking is that they recognise the work that their colleagues do here."

Wincanton workers need to base their assessment of Unite not only on their own experiences, but the role it is playing nationally alongside the other trade unions in distribution and logistics. These pro-company organisations are the favoured mechanism of the employers in preventing mass industrial action and rolling-out below inflation pay deals.

Workers' determination to wage a struggle against the major companies which have profited hugely over the course of a raging pandemic has been demonstrated. Over the last month 14,000 workers have been balloted or scheduled to vote for strike action at distribution centres for three of the four largest supermarkets, Tesco, Morrisons and Asda.

Unite called off the ballot to strike by 1,000 workers at Morrisons who had rejected a pay offer of between 2-3 percent to pave the way for a 5 percent agreement. At Tesco the union suspended strike action by around 1,200 workers at four distribution centres to recommend a revised pay offer of 5.5 percent this year and 0.5 percent from February 2022. The strike would have coincided with that of 5,000 members of USDAW at nine other Tesco distribution centres in the week before Christmas. USDAW has now suspended that strike to recommend the same below-inflation deal.

At ASDA the GMB union has reacted to the rejection by workers of a zero percent offer by organising a non-

binding consultative ballot of its 7,000 members in distribution. This closes on December 20, ensuring there will be no strike action this side of Christmas.

These organisations are trade unions in name only. In practice they oppose any conflict with the employers, even on the most basic level of a wage increase.

The averting of strike action also serves to keep workers on the job as the pandemic takes a more dangerous turn with the emergence of the Omicron variant. The herd immunity strategy of the Johnson government has already claimed more than 170,000 lives. The completely inadequate Plan B measures supported by the Labour Party and trade unions are premised on the agreement that no public health measures will be taken which impede the economic interests of big business. The risk of transmission is highest in schools and in workplaces and factories, which they insist must be kept open as the interests of profit are placed before the protection of life.

Wincanton workers must oppose the undermining of their fight by Unite through the establishment of a rank-and-file committee to link up their action with HGV drivers at the Worksop depot, and appeal for solidarity from other workers at B&Q distribution centres around the country. They should make links with the workers at Morrisons, Tesco and ASDA and oppose the conspiracy of the trade unions to sabotage the fight for a living wage which is inflation proofed. This should be linked to a fight for an elimination strategy against the pandemic, including the closure of non-essential business with workers provided full economic protection and urgent reviews of safety measures in key industries to ensure the maximum protection through ventilation, social distancing and adequate PPE.



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