

UK Tesco workers—reject USDAW-Unite pay sellout!

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Just over a week after receiving major mandates for strike action by over 6,000 Tesco workers at 13 distribution centres, the Unite union and Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) have engineered a sellout.

USDAW announced on December 14 the suspension of its planned strike of 5,000 workers, due to commence on December 20. Joanne McGuinness, USDAW national officer, said: “After the overwhelming vote in favour of industrial action, Tesco reopened pay negotiations with Usdaw. I am pleased to say that we have been successful in achieving a significantly improved offer and Usdaw is recommending that members accept it in the ballot.”

The “significantly improved offer,” announced a day later, amounted to a 5.5 percent pay increase, backdated to July, with an additional 0.5 percent from the end of next February.

This followed Unite’s suspension of strike action by 1,200 more Tesco distribution workers at four other distribution centres in favour of the same pay offer one week earlier. National Officer Adrian Jones commented, “Right from the beginning of this dispute Unite has been clear that Tesco could afford to make a more generous offer and that has proved to be the case.”

Tesco workers should reject these rotten deals. These key workers voted for strike action to fight a below-inflation pay “increase” of 4 percent from a multibillion-pound organisation which has reaped huge profits from their labour throughout a raging pandemic. The offers being forced on them by USDAW and Unite are a betrayal of this struggle.

Workers in the UK are facing a cost-of-living crisis, with wages failing to keep pace with the increasing costs of basic goods. The total 6 percent pay offer only

just kept pace with the rate of RPI inflation reported for October. The updated rate of inflation for November (7.1 percent) rubs salt in the wound. Even the lower CPI rate of inflation is expected to outstrip 6 percent next year.

No mention has been made by either union of what will happen to pay at the nine Tesco distribution centres in the UK which did not strike.

USDAW and Unite are recommending workers call off their offensive and accept an effective pay cut in conditions in which they occupy a powerful economic position and confront the serious dangers of COVID-19 in the workplace.

For several months, business leaders have been ruing an unprecedented shortage of warehouse staff. Clare Bottle, CEO of the UK Warehousing Association, complained in September that some employers were having to increase pay by between 20 percent and 30 percent to secure workers for entry level jobs. She explained, “The problem is big. I would say we’re tens of thousands short.”

Earlier this month, Logistics UK reported that in the year to November vacancies for forklift drivers increased by 169 percent and for warehouse jobs by 143 percent. The organisation warned that labour shortages will persist, explaining, “there remains concern that some supply chain disruption will continue in 2022 until these crucial roles are filled across the industry.” Just last Thursday, BBC News published an article headlined, “Logistics: ‘Finding warehouse staff a significant challenge’.”

Even the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* was forced to acknowledge of the Tesco strike, “The labour market is in unions’ favour,” quoting Paul Dales of economic research organisation Capital Economics: “There is also a lot of demand for workers, and not a lot of

workers to fill those positions—or they’re not in the right sector. That gives employees a bit more bargaining power: ‘if I leave, you might not be able to replace me’.”

A strike would leave Tesco flailing to find staff in the run-up to Christmas; a period which is vital to the company’s profits. Last year, Tesco reported a “record Christmas” driven by an 8.1 percent increase in sales in the six-week festive trading period. Online sales alone in this period delivered the company an extra £1 billion. Clive Black, retail analyst at Shore capital, warned when the strikes were still on the table, “Tesco can’t afford to have any real dislocation of labour and capacity at such a key time of the year.”

Industrial action would also create the basis to fight for safe working conditions in the context of an unprecedented surge of COVID-19 infections driven by the Omicron variant. The government recorded 584,688 coronavirus cases in the 7 days up to December 20.

Besides endangering workers, the spread of infection will exacerbate labour shortages, bringing with it speed-ups and mandatory overtime to ensure profits can be maintained, even as workers are dying. There will be continued pressure for workers to “stay on the job” and ensure sales and profits targets for this Christmas are delivered.

Neil Bowker, chair of the United Kingdom Warehousing Association, told the *Financial Times*, “Seasonal handling requirements have increased and as experienced warehouse operatives isolate with the virus, the challenges are amplified.”

USDAW and Unite are attempting to orchestrate a surrender precisely because of the strong position occupied by their members, and the urgency of pandemic situation. A powerful strike would jeopardise the unions’ corporatist relationship with Tesco, through which they have facilitated successive attacks on the workforce and on whose behalf they have kept workers on the job in unsafe conditions.

Today’s trade unions are not workers’ organisations but management partners, well rewarded for policing the workforce. USDAW’s general secretary Paddy Lillis receives wages and benefits to the tune of £166,509 a year. He receives more in pension contributions alone (£23,560) than many Tesco warehouse workers earn in total. Sharon Graham’s predecessor as Unite general secretary Len McCluskey

(figures for her are not yet available) received £101,568 a year.

Pushing their sellout deal, Graham declared, “Tesco’s improved offer shows what can be achieved by our members standing together.” USDAW’s McGuinness echoed, “This is a clear demonstration of what can be achieved when we collectively stand together.”

But “members standing together” is precisely what the unions are striving to prevent. Unite called off a planned strike of 1,100 Morrisons distribution workers in late November for a 5 percent deal. They are trying to do the same with Tesco, isolating the 7,000 Asda distribution workers being dragged through a consultative ballot by the GMB for action in the New Year.

USDAW, Unite and the GMB are concerned that strikes across three of the four biggest supermarket chains in the UK over the Christmas trading period, potentially involving tens of thousands of workers and amid a surge of the pandemic, would spread to other logistics workers and embolden the working class more broadly.

Workers in all sectors are showing increasing militancy, including warehouse workers at B&Q, bus drivers at Stagecoach, teachers and parents against unsafe schools, public transport and NHS employees. The unions are acting as firefighters to suppress the class struggle and prevent action breaking out which might unduly threaten corporate profits and the government’s policy of “living with the virus.”

The Socialist Equality party urges Tesco workers to break free from the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy by forming rank-and-file committees. Only through these organisations can they make use of their strength and take forward their struggle, by mobilising broader layers of workers in a common fight based on their own independent interests, not those of the company and the trade unions.



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