B&Q warehouse workers in Worksop, UK to strike indefinitely over pay

Tony Robson
22 December 2021

Over 400 warehouse workers at the B&Q distribution centre in Worksop in the East Midlands are set to take indefinite strike action from Christmas Eve in their pay dispute with Wincanton Logistics Ltd.

The members of Unite voted to escalate strike action just prior to their second round of seven-day strikes ending last week. Workers had originally voted for alternate weeks of strikes followed by an overtime ban until February 20.

Since the action began at the end of last month, Wincanton has not offered any revised offer to the 4 percent wage rise that was overwhelmingly rejected and has since fallen even further behind inflation, which has climbed to 7.1 percent.

As of the time of writing, Unite has not issued a press statement regarding the indefinite strike action though almost a fortnight has passed since the vote. Unite has stated that the dispute is as much about union busting as pay but has also kept silent over the methods employed by Wincanton to bully workers against taking strike action. Its entire strategy is directed towards rebuilding relations with Wincanton and denying the fact that the fight for a pay rise must be conducted at the expense of the continued profit drive of the company.

Warehouse workers at Worksop B&Q receive an hourly basic rate of pay of just £9.96 an hour. Their defiance has been triggered not only by the rising cost of living but the recognition that both B&Q (owned by Kingfisher) and its sub-contractor Wincanton have continued to make record profits. Kingfisher reported an increase in yearly pre-tax profits up to March this year of 634 percent and Wincanton a 42 percent increase for the first half of this year.

Workers not only confront a fight against the company, intent on enforcing a below inflation pay deal, but also against Unite and its isolation of their struggle. Unite has driven a wedge between the fight of warehouse workers and HGV drivers at the B&Q distribution centre—the latter currently in a pay dispute with another B&Q sub-contractor, GXO Logistics. The union is dragging out negotiations, ensuring that the two struggles are not unified. This has enabled the Worksop distribution centre to remain operational with a skeleton staff.

Unite has sought to ignore workers' vote for a 6 percent pay demand when inflation stood at 4.5 percent, which now needs to be revised upwards to meet rising inflation.

In a video message on December 14, following the vote for indefinite strike action, Unite senior rep Pat McGrath made his appeal to the company boardrooms. In reference to B&Q and Wincanton he stated, "All we are asking is that they recognise the work that the colleagues do here."

McGrath has attempted to misrepresent the criticism made by the *World Socialist Web Site* of the union as equivalent to siding with the company and its "union busting", even as he reaches out to B&Q and Wincanton and tells workers to pin their hopes on their tender mercy.

The union bureaucracy recognises that the criticism of its divisive approach is a threat to restoring its corporate relations with Wincanton and B&Q.

The fight being waged by workers at Worksop would have already been joined by thousands of workers across the sector if it were not for the actions of Unite, USDAW and the GMB. Workers across the UK at distribution centres for three of the four largest supermarkets, Morrisons, Tesco and Asda, have voted emphatically for strike action only for the unions to demonstrate they are the main instrument for

© World Socialist Web Site

preventing mass industrial action.

At Morrisons the strike ballot of 1,100 workers at two distribution centres was shelved at the end of November by Unite to pave the way for a 5 percent pay increase. Unite and USDAW have suspended strike action by over 6,000 Tesco workers at 13 distribution centres to ballot on a revised offer of 5.5 percent for 2021 and 0.5 percent for the year following. They are both recommending acceptance of the below inflation offers, having blocked strike action in the fortnight to Christmas.

On Tuesday the GMB consultative ballot for strike action of around 7,000 warehouse operatives, clerical staff and lorry drivers at Asda returned a mandate of 94 percent in favour. The GMB's press release stated that thousands of workers are "ready to walk" but the union has prevented this by holding a non-binding consultative ballot, with a formal ballot yet to be decided.

The union bureaucracy is fully aware of the opposition it is tasked with trying to police. Nadine Houghton, GMB National Officer, stated, "This immense vote in favour of industrial action shows the bubbling anger and resentment among the workers. They know what they are worth and they feel Asda is trying to take them for mugs."

Workers will not be taken for mugs by the GMB either. The union feigns outrage over Asda's profits of £486 million last year but responds to the pay freeze faced by workers with a mealy-mouthed appeal for the company to make a "meaningful offer."

As for the claim by Hougton that workers deserve a slice of the "pandemic profit pie", the GMB, USDAW and Unite are actively suppressing a fight for a redistribution of the ill-gotten wealth of the pandemic profiteers. They are continuing the role they have played throughout the pandemic to keep workers on the job even as their living standards are stripped back and they are provided little or no protection in the face of a resurgent virus and its more transmissible Omicron variant.

Unite is aware of the broad support for the strike action by Wincanton workers but is seeking ways to manage this safely. Its East Midlands branch has established a Wincanton Hardship Fund to financially assist the strikers even though Unite has a much vaunted "war chest" of £40 million which is meant provide support.

Workers should demand that they receive the equivalent of their daily wage from the resources they have built up through their contributions. It is workers on the frontline of the struggle who need these finances rather than the well-heeled bureaucrats led by General Secretary Sharon Graham, who has acted as the unions' chief firefighter against a strike wave and celebrated one below inflation deal after another.

A rank-and-file committee should be formed, made up of trusted representatives who will fight for the mandate of the membership for a cost of living pay deal and who will not engage in backroom deals with management.

The distribution centre must be shut down to enforce workers' demands and links forged between warehouse workers and HGV drivers. Whether it is Wincanton or GXO Logistics this is one struggle, one fight for a living wage.

Solidarity action must be appealed for from workers at the other B&Q distribution centres across the UK and links made with workers at Tesco, Morrisons and Asda in the fight against below inflation deals endorsed by the union bureaucracy. This should be joined to the fight for emergency health measures to prevent transmission of the virus in overcrowded workplaces, including the closure of non-essential business with workers provided full economic support.

An urgent review must be undertaken in key industries to ensure contact tracing, adequate PPE, social distancing and ventilation measures are enforced. Workers must mobilise their independent strength against the corporate oligarchy and the prioritisation of profits over lives by the Johnson government and its de facto allies in the Labour Party.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site