UK: Stuart delivery drivers in Sheffield strike into third week, spark action in other cities

Trevor Johnson
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A strike of fast-food delivery workers employed by Stuart—a subcontractor for Just Eat—is now into its third week. Having begun in Sheffield, the strike has been taken up in other towns and cities in the north of England, including Chesterfield, Blackpool, Sunderland and Huddersfield.

Stuart is imposing cuts in payment for local deliveries by nearly 25 percent from £4.50 to £3.40. The new payment model is being introduced nationally, having been introduced in Manchester in September, and Sheffield on December 6. This is a savage attack on workers already earning less than the minimum wage.

The workers on strike are members of the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB). Picketing has focused on the McDonald's franchises—one of the largest fast-food outlets that uses Just Eat for deliveries. The pickets have been successful in reducing sales at the targeted locations.

There are other indications that the stand taken by Stuart workers against their conditions of raw exploitation is gathering wider support. A hardship fund set up for the strikers has doubled to around £8,000 since the start of December. Other delivery drivers are reportedly joining the strike through the picketing.

It has been revealed that the CEO of Stuart, Damien Bon, was given a 1,000 percent pay rise and took home over £2.2 million last year, as the company's profits shot up by £19.5 million—from £20.5 million to £40 million between 2019 and 2020—as a result of the pandemic. Even so, the company paid no corporation tax in 2020, claiming it had made an operating loss of £7 million. Stuart is a part of the DPD group, a transnational company with a workforce of at least 48,000.

A delivery driver who joined the strike as a result of picketing in Sheffield was angered by the disparity between Bon's payout and his own. The little the workers receive for their work will be further reduced through rising petrol prices and a rate of inflation which has topped 7 per cent.

Another Stuart delivery driver in Sunderland told the *Sunderland Echo*, "You can take less than £10 an hour then you have to take off insurance and taxes and be earning £3 or £4 an hour if you are lucky. Something needs to happen. If it's bad now when it's Christmas, what are we going to do in January when it's quiet?"

The relationship of Stuart to the workers doing the deliveries is completely parasitic, since it only provides an "app" to connect customers to drivers, without any other involvement or costs on their part. Currently, Stuart gets away without paying for transport, insurance or sick pay on the grounds that the workers are "self-employed". Since the company does not communicate with its workers and has no knowledge of their work, a fraudulent report of non-delivery can lead to a worker losing their job without any right of appeal.

Just Eat/Takeaway (JET) skims off another part of the money that should be going to the workers but denies any role in deciding the way they are treated.

The potential for a national strike against Stuart is shown by the fact that the action in Sheffield has sparked similar walkouts in other cities. Delivery workers in Huddersfield and Blackpool have taken five days of strike action with workers in Sunderland carrying out a few hours' stoppage to stage a protest.

But this cannot be taken forward based on the narrow perspective advanced by the IWGB. The union contrasts "gig economy" workers with those in other sectors who are portrayed as having secure, well-paid jobs and workplace rights courtesy of the trade unions. This is far from the truth.

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The reality is that the COVID-19 pandemic has been used to shred pay and terms under the threat of fire and rehire policies, with one in 10 workers rehired on inferior contracts. The past year has witnessed an unprecedented betrayal of workers taking strike action to defeat this wholesale attack.

At British Gas, the GMB union allowed fire and rehire to be enforced with the loss of hundreds of jobs after the biggest strike at the company in four decades. Unite isolated strike action at Go North West, the longest strike in generations on the buses, and at coffee manufacturer JDE, involving two months of rolling strike action. Company ultimatums were withdrawn only on the precondition that the union waved through the sweeping cuts in pay and overturning of terms and conditions being demanded.

The IWGB portrays the mainly immigrant delivery workers as needing the support of figures who will be listened to by a big business such as Stuart. On this basis they boast the backing of local Sheffield Labour MP Olivia Blake in every article they publish about the strike.

Blake has written letters to Stuart which the company has ignored. She pitches her complaints to the non-existent "social conscience" of those such as Bon, asking them to "do the right thing" while they are making vicious attacks on their employees. Blake fully accepts that the Stuart directors have the right to put their own interests first and do what they need to make a profit. She humbly asks them not to be so blatant about it and says they can still make a profit with workers on £6 per delivery and with an hourly rate set at minimum wage levels.

Another Sheffield MP cited in support of Stuart drivers is Paul Blomfield, even though he has not had a word to say about the dispute on his website. The real relationship between Labour and Just Eat is shown by the fact that, in August, JET's CEO Jitse Groen—a billionaire and founder of Takeaway.com—wrote to Blomfield to say the company is switching sub-contractor from Stuart to Scoober in the first half of 2022. Far from taking up any campaign on behalf JET/Stuart workers whose jobs were put under threat by the change-over, Blomfield has remained silent.

The IWGB, in spite of its name, is oriented to these same forces that have brought workers nothing but defeats, pay cuts and casualisation for the best part of 40 years. It has been forced into calling strike action by the militancy of its members who the union realised would not accept a 25 percent pay cut.

The union proclaims that the strike is already the longest in the gig economy. This is testimony to the determination of Stuart workers to fight, but only highlights the necessarily far broader mobilisation required to defeat the transnationals such as DPD and JET. It is clear after weeks of strike action that the perspective of the IWGB is a parochial and sectional one that is inadequate in the face of the catastrophe facing millions as the employers use the pandemic to drive up exploitation and profits.

A far broader mobilisation and frontal assault on the profits of the "pandemic millionaires" is required to win an improvement for delivery drivers or any other section of workers. Stuart delivery drivers have expressed their interest in and support for a global movement of workers against the transnationals.

The basis for such a movement has already been revealed in strike movements in the US and internationally, with workers overturning a decades-long suppression of the class struggle by the pro-company industrial police forces which go by the name of trade unions. The Socialist Equality Party and its sister parties internationally provide a perspective and organising centre for this struggle with the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We encourage Stuart workers to contact the SEP to discuss how to build this movement.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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