

Workshop B&Q warehouse workers enter fourth week of all-out pay strike

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The struggle by more than 450 warehouse workers for a pay rise against sub-contractor Wincanton Ltd at the Workshop B&Q distribution centre in the east Midlands is at a critical juncture.

After two week-long stoppages in December, shopfloor workers at the distribution centre voted to escalate their fight to all-out strike action starting on Christmas Eve.

The all-out strike, now entering its fourth week, against a derisory 4 percent pay proceeds in defiance of a campaign of intimidation by Wincanton.

The company has not come back with any revised offer, confirming its hostility to the demand for a genuine above inflation pay increase for workers who receive a basic rate of just £9.96 an hour.

Warehouse workers and lorry drivers are in position to drive home their fight, with a labour shortage continuing to threaten supply lines. This is the result of the criminal rejection of public health measures by the Johnson government allowing the pandemic to rip, first with Delta and now Omicron, and the difficulty of filling job vacancies due to the chronic low pay and exploitative conditions in the sector.

The conditions are ripe for a major counteroffensive by the working class, which knows its lives, health and living standards are being sacrificed so the profits of Wincanton and B&Q (owned by Kingfisher) can reach obscene levels.

As one worker commented, “The pandemic is the best thing to happen to B&Q for a long time.”

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 to March 2021, a massive 634 percent increase, as it cashed in through online purchasing of DIY products during the lockdowns.

The strike at the Workshop B&Q distribution centre is the first since it opened 16 years ago. The opposition of workers to the pandemic profiteers and desire to mobilise their strength in an uncompromising fight is widely shared and expressed in increased strike activity in warehouse and logistics, public transport, municipal services such as waste management and collection, and fast food delivery. This makes yet more obscene the isolation of the dispute by Unite and its plaintive appeals to corporate boardrooms.

Since the start of the dispute, Unite has never officially adopted the demand made by its membership for an above inflation wage agreement—referring only to an “acceptable” offer. While it has stated the dispute is also about union busting, Unite has not made public evidence of intimidation against the entire workforce for taking part in strike action including potential disciplinary action, reduction in entitlements and threat of police action against picketing.

A genuine fight against union busting would require the maximum mobilisation of the workforce, but Unite has not even co-ordinated action with lorry drivers at the Workshop site who are members of the union and involved in a pay dispute with sub-contractor GXO Logistics.

This is the reason why the distribution centre has remained operational with a skeleton staff in the warehouse during the strike action.

For months Unite has remained silent on the situation across B&Q to unify the fight of lorry drivers with workers in the warehouse and to adopt a company-wide fightback strategy.

On January 10, Unite and its General Secretary Sharon Graham issued a press release, “Bumper profits B&Q’s supply chain hit by all out pay strikes and spreading industrial unrest.” It exposes the pent-up

opposition Unite is sitting on.

The release notes the fact that GXO lorry drivers at the Cambuslang distribution centre in Scotland have already voted for strike action against a below inflation pay offer and refers to the “potential for drivers in Doncaster and Worksop to down tools.”

But for Unite this is only raised as a bargaining chip with B&Q and its sub-contractors to spare them from what they fear most, a combined fight by workers, with Graham warning B&Q that the refusal to make any meagre concessions “is now coming back to bite them.”

“We make no apology for demanding that B&Q step in and get its supply chain partners, whose profits are skyrocketing off the backs of Unite members, to table acceptable pay offers.”

The references to the soaring profits of B&Q by Graham is empty rhetoric, as shown by Unite’s insistence that the struggle of warehouse workers and lorry drivers at both sub-contractors of B&Q are separate disputes

Unite’s calls for “reasonable” and “acceptable” offers is the language of evasion and submission. A demand is associated with a fight to protect living standards against the enrichment of the companies, or it is nothing.

Graham is saying that the corporations can continue to amass their profits and avoid an explosion of the workers opposition if they part with small change to guarantee class peace, with Unite acting as enforcer. This corporatist agenda is directed against the development of the class struggle, which would undermine the privileged position of the union bureaucracy.

The stand taken by warehouse workers at B&Q Worksop has been isolated as a result of Unite, along with the other main unions, USDAW and the GMB, block ing a strike movement in the run up to Christmas by thousands of distribution workers and lorry drivers at three of the four main supermarkets Morrisons, Tesco and ASDA.

Unite called off a strike ballot by over a thousand workers at Morrisons to agree a 5 percent pay increase and, along with USDAW, overturned a strike mandate at Tesco to recommend a 5.5 percent increase this year and 0.5 percent for the following year. With inflation running at 7.1 percent, it has worked to enforce below

inflation agreements for the mega-rich companies.

The potential for mobilising lorry drivers with warehouses workers at Worksop B&Q and developing a counteroffensive across the distributions centres in the UK must be realised through the formation of a network of rank-and-file committees to take the dispute out of the hands of Unite.

The only “acceptable” offer is an above inflation pay increase. This must be taken up as non-negotiable by trusted representatives of workers who are not party to the backroom deals hatched by Graham.

The fight against the pandemic profiteers and the general cost of living crisis is inseparable from a fight against the criminal response to the pandemic by the Johnson government and its de facto Labour allies. They demand society “live with COVID”, which guarantees more infections and deaths as all public health measures are lifted and isolation times cut to ensure the supply of labour to the corporations to shore up their profits and share values.

The fight to bring the pandemic under control and protect lives is becoming rooted in a powerful strike movement across the US and Europe. The Socialist Equality Party is encouraging and guiding this fight for a programme of elimination of the pandemic, as part of a globally co-ordinated effort through the building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees. We urge workers to contact us and discuss how this movement can be built.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact