

Stuart delivery drivers' strike enters sixth week

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Food delivery workers in Sheffield are waging the longest strike in the gig economy sector in UK history. Drivers employed by Stuart, a subcontractor for fast-food app Just Eat, have entered the sixth week of their strike action.

The workers are opposing a 24 percent pay cut, from £4.50 to £3.40 for most deliveries, being rolled out city-by-city. Already paid below the minimum wage, the drivers must work 12 to 15 hours extra each week to recoup lost income. The company has also increased the time its delivery workers must wait unpaid for new jobs to be assigned to them.

The striking workers, members of the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain (IWGB), held a demonstration outside Just Eat's London headquarters on January 28 and two rallies in Sheffield in addition to regular picketing of McDonald's franchises in the city. Their stand has attracted widespread sympathy, as shown in donations to their hardship fund, reflecting broad opposition towards pandemic profiteers such as Stuart and Just Eat.

With the spread of precarious employment and the growth of corporate parasites profiting from the expansion of a super exploited workforce the fight at Stuart raises the question as to how workers can win their fight.

The IWGB, which was formed in 2012, describes itself as "a grassroots member-led union fighting for the rights of some of the most ignored and marginalised workers in the UK." However, far from being "independent" it has revealed itself to be no less conservative and pro-business than the more established trade unions.

Strike action at Stuart in Sheffield was suspended for more than two weeks during the busy holiday period from Christmas Eve to January 10. IWGB President Alex Marshall claimed this was "to give the management time to reflect on the damage they had caused to their workers lives."

Marshall then professed shock that the union's overtures to the company had been met by company efforts to "gaslight workers and push lies about the cuts."

Instead of mobilising fast food delivery drivers more broadly, the IWGB has concentrated its efforts on building up alliances with local businesses that use Stuart. The union presented a statement signed by companies including Subway and Costa Coffee pleading with Just Eat to intervene, "Please urge Stuart to reverse the pay cut so we can get back to having a good relationship with Just Eat and Stuart."

The IWGB tweeted a grovelling appeal, "Like Stuart, these businesses rely on delivery drivers to exist. Turns out the pay cut is bad for business, not just for workers. Stuart, you know what to do!"

That the IWGB can find a pro-business angle in the Stuart dispute only goes to show that despite its militant rhetoric it will do nothing to challenge the obscene levels of corporate wealth being wrung from workers.

Noting that Stuart CEO Damien Bon helped himself to a 1000 percent pay rise last year, the IWGB sent him a letter expressing its "kind regards" and concern for the company's reputation and appealing for them to "engage with us" to "resolve this dispute." The letter dated January 28 acknowledges that Stuart has offered nothing to address workers' core demands, refusing to reverse its slashing of delivery rates let alone meet their calls for a £6 base rate plus mileage.

The pretence that Stuart will suddenly develop a social conscience and the IWGB's denial of the essential conflict between the workers and the profit gouging corporations is a political obscenity amplified by the Labour Party and trade union bureaucracy.

Concerned over the growth of working-class resistance, false friends of Stuart delivery drivers are seeking to channel workers' anger behind the Labour Party's corporatist relations with big business. Labour MP for

Sheffield Olivia Blake wrote to the company humbly asking them to “do the right thing.” Such hollow appeals, promoted by the union, have fallen on stony ground.

Sheffield Trades Council has offered token gestures of solidarity while its affiliated unions including the GMB and Unite work to break-up a growing strike movement, enforcing below inflation wage deals among local refuse workers and bus drivers at Stagecoach Yorkshire .

Stuart is working to break the strike by hiring new drivers, many of whom are joining the walkout. Their competitor firms, including Deliveroo and Uber Eats, continue to operate unhindered, with no effort by the IWGB to unite these workers in common struggle against the transnational companies that exploit them.

New technology is used under capitalism to increase the rate of exploitation of the working class to enrich corporate executives, shareholders and other investors. Logistics companies such as Stuart operate as the middle-man, providing systems used to connect restaurant orders to delivery drivers, for which they take half the fee.

Stuart workers are “self-employed” drivers. They are denied basic protections and entitlements such as sick pay and must meet the costs of their own vehicle maintenance, insurance and fuel. The pittance they receive is being further reduced through rising petrol prices and living costs, with the inflation rate at 5.4 per cent as measured by the Consumer Price Index and the Retail Price Index at over 7 percent.

Stuart operates in over 100 cities across Europe, including in France, Poland, Spain and Portugal. It has increased its profits by millions of pounds during the pandemic as fewer people have eaten at restaurants and bars.

The strike in Sheffield follows previous movements amongst precarious app workers such as Deliveroo drivers who struck in April last year for better pay and employment rights. Last March, drivers in Plymouth contracted to Uber Eats protested their pay being slashed below the minimum wage.

In taking strike action, couriers in Sheffield are taking a stand against the dictates of both Just Eat (with over 450,000 delivery riders) and Stuart, which is part of the transnational DPD Group with (with at least 48,000 employees).

The number of people working for gig economy platforms has tripled in the last five years in England and Wales. Among working adults those working on gig economy platforms at least once a week has increased from 5.8 percent in 2016 to 14.7 percent today.

This section of precarious workers is entering into growing struggles against exploitation. Uber drivers organised a 24-hour strike against the taxi app last September, with demonstrations outside eight Uber offices across the country.

The strike at Stuart has found strong support. A hardship fund has raised over £18,000 over the course of the strike. When two Stuart delivery drivers addressed a rally of striking university workers in Sheffield last December, they received warm support as their common issues, such as casualisation and low-pay, were clearly recognised.

Having begun in Sheffield, the movement has sparked solidarity action across the north of England including in Chesterfield, Blackpool, Sunderland and Huddersfield. There is potential for a far broader strike if the tens of thousands of workers in the gig economy and logistics sector are brought together across the UK and Europe.

As the WSWs explained at the start of the strike, “Rather than allies of Stuart workers, the Labour Party and the trade unions are doing everything they can to prevent strikes, suppress the class struggle and keep the viciously right-wing Conservative government of Boris Johnson in power as they make unprecedented attacks on the working class.”

The strike in Sheffield demonstrates the determination of workers to fight, but Stuart drivers must defy the IWGB’s and Labour’s pro-business agenda and elect rank-and-file strike committees to organise a genuine fightback, uniting all sections of the working class against the relentless assault on pay and conditions.



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