

UK ASDA workers: Reject poverty level pay deal! For a joint fight of supermarket distribution workers!

Kelly Taylor, Thomas Scripps
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Nearly 8,000 ASDA distribution workers represented by the GMB union are being balloted on an insulting pay deal presented by management in early January. The company is attempting to prevent a major strike, which workers voted by 94.5 percent to support in a consultative ballot last December.

The pay deal is for a base rate increase of 40p for warehouse and clerical workers from January-April 2022 and an additional 25p from May 2022-May 2023. Transport workers will receive a £500 driver retention payment in April 2022 and a base rate increase of 98p from May 2022-May 2023. According to the GMB, “depending on location,” the pay deal amounts to a 4.98-6.10 percent for clerical workers, 4.98-5.87 percent for warehouse workers and 6.49-7.53 percent for transport workers.

CPI inflation is currently at 5.4 percent. Last Thursday, the Bank of England forecast that it would rise to 7.25 percent in April. RPI inflation including housing costs is already at 7.5 percent and will climb far higher. ASDA’s offer leaves workers on a paltry £11-14 an hour, or £14-16 for drivers. This comes on top of effective pay cuts and rampant exploitation in dangerous conditions throughout the pandemic, during which ASDA increased directors’ pay by 38.8 percent.

Even as it acknowledges the previous “below cost of living pay increase” and workers’ “risking your lives and your health to keep the nation fed, seeing some colleagues sadly lose their lives to Covid”, the GMB is attempting to force this rotten settlement on its members.

It presented the offer to workers with the dishonest claim that it was “NOT attaching any recommendation to this offer.” However, National Officer Nadine Houghton made their real position clear, writing to GMB members, “Is it everything we asked for? Absolutely not. Is it

everything our members deserve? No—your labour makes the company profits and you deserve all of that too.

“But...

“For our warehouse members, does the offer address the cost-of-living crisis many of you will face? Very nearly. Does it bring you in line with what Asda's competitors received? Yes. Is it a significant improvement on where we started? Absolutely.”

She warned that if workers rejected the offer, “You must be prepared to vote for and take part in industrial action to achieve something better. Do not vote to reject this offer unless you are prepared to take that next step.”

As the ballot opened, Houghton commented again, “Asda’s distribution workers have put pressure on bosses to get an improved pay offer. It is now up to them if they are willing to accept it. If they turn this pay offer down, we will have no choice but to move to a formal strike ballot.”

Workers can read between the lines. The GMB is telling them that this is the deal they have come to with the company and that, if their members reject it, the union will not wage a serious fight for more but seek to sell out the strike on ASDA’s behalf.

The GMB has spent the last two years trying to shut down ASDA workers’ struggle over pay. Earlier in the pandemic, the union buried the dispute in talks with the arbitration body ACAS, with predictable results. ACAS sided with the employer and imposed a paltry 1.77 percent increase for May 2020-21 (2 percent for workers at the lowest paid 5 depots), and a 2 percent increase for May 2021-22.

Annual CPI inflation to May 2021 was 2.1 percent (RPI, 3.3 percent), and to May 2022 it will likely be over seven, turning these pay “rises” into crippling cuts. The deal was so bad that the GMB was forced to reopen negotiations

last September and seek an interim pay award, referring nervously to a “groundswell of anger amongst the current workforce” and a “huge amount of ill feeling from staff”.

Rather than organise these workers, all the union’s attention was directed towards the company, which it turned to with an appeal to defuse the situation. Warning of a “staffing crisis”, Houghton called on ASDA “to get its house in order” and “get round the table with us urgently”. She authored an obsequious letter to ASDA’s multi-billionaire owners, Mohsin and Zuber Issa, declaring, “I’m looking forward to working with you and hope we can begin the relationship in an open and constructive fashion.”

Two months of sham negotiations followed. On October 1, the GMB announced a new proposal to be put to the company for the pay anniversary to be brought forward to October 1, a £2 an hour increase for warehouse and clerical staff, £4 for transport and a harmonization of shift premiums.

The company refused to negotiate and sought to meet their driver shortage with agency staff being paid well above their regular workers and implemented one-time recruitment and retention bonuses. A meeting was finally organised between the GMB and ASDA a month later, November 8, which Houghton described as “constructive”. She added, “Asda have given a commitment to making an early pay offer for ALL groups of staff... Asda have committed to making this offer at talks on the 29 / 30th November at Asda House.”

At those talks ASDA refused to make an offer. The GMB described it as an “insult” but again did not call for action. Instead, they organised a ballot on ASDA’s “0 percent” offer, with a consultative vote on strike action, which would run from December 3 to December 20. Houghton wrote, “Your senior stewards will consider next steps in the first week of January.”

These months of delay were designed to isolate ASDA workers from other supermarket distribution workers at Tesco and Morrisons, represented by the Unite and USDAW unions. In late October, 3,500 lorry and warehouse workers at Tesco were balloted by Unite. In mid-November, over 1,000 Morrisons distribution workers were balloted by the same union. Later that month, over 5,000 Tesco workers represented by USDAW were balloted. All returned massive votes in favour.

The three unions worked to make sure the prospect of an 18,000-strong strike concentrated in the supermarket distribution centre never materialised. Unite cancelled the

Morrisons ballot on November 29 for a below-inflation 5 percent pay deal. On December 8, the union cancelled its Tesco strike for a 6 percent pay offer. USDAW followed suit on December 14, recommending the same offer as Unite.

Now the GMB are working with ASDA to finish the job. As well as pressuring workers to accept the deal, they have divided them by splitting the ballot between warehouse workers and drivers, citing “extenuating circumstances” caused by the driver shortage. ASDA has threatened to refuse to recognize a split result. Workers at the same company represented by the same union are already so divided that the company’s pay offer amounts to a different percentage increase “depending on location”.

ASDA workers should reject the company’s deal. But the GMB’s actions make clear that they must do so with a plan to take the leadership of their struggle out of the hands of the union. Its interests are in maintaining peaceful relations with ASDA, drawing millions in salaries from members’ dues (the GMB reports £36,973,000 paid in “renewal and expenses of staff” in 2020, £288,000 of which went to former General Secretary Tim Roache) while policing the company’s workforce.

To wage a two-front struggle against the company and the union, workers should form their own rank-and-file committees. These should organise with other workers, including B&Q distribution workers confronting a union-sponsored sellout, and above all those at Tesco and Morrisons. A rejection of the ASDA pay deal must be the starting point of a fight to overturn every betrayal organised by the unions in the distribution sector and secure across-the-board improvements in pay and conditions based on workers’ needs, not companies’ profits.



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