

B&Q, Wincanton workers should reject below inflation pay offer! Mobilise a unified fightback against B&Q and its subcontractors!

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Unite is balloting around 450 striking warehouse workers at the B&Q distribution centre in Worksop, East Midlands over a revised pay offer from subcontractor, Wincanton.

For the first time since the warehouse workers escalated their action to an all-out strike from Christmas Eve the company sat down for talks with representatives of Unite last Tuesday. The strike has remained solid, with large turnouts on the picket lines.

Unite has not produced a press release regarding the offer or the ballot, with the results to be announced this coming Friday. It was left to the Unite Senior Rep at the Worksop site Pat McGrath to make the announcement in a short video on the union Twitter page Friday, stating that the workers could be back on the job by February 13.

The low-key update coming on week 10 of the industrial dispute is because the union is unable to claim that the revised offer meets the demands of Wincanton workers. McGrath's guarded comments indicate that Unite is throwing its weight behind acceptance of the "improved offer" he acknowledges faces resistance. He commented, "We're optimistic it may go through but there is still a lot of people upset about how they have been treat."

From what the WSWs has been able to confirm the revised offer for the 2021/22 pay agreement is 6.75 percent and a one off COVID pandemic payment of £250.

Inflation measured by RPI (the criteria Unite claims to follow) stands at 7.5 percent. When Wincanton workers voted last November for strike action they

demanded a 6 percent raise against the 4 percent offered by the company. Inflation has been rising, which means Unite are pushing a de facto pay cut.

The £250 one-off payment for COVID is an insult. The strike action, the first of its kind at the distribution centre since it opened in 2005 on the site of the former Manton Wood colliery, was fuelled by anger over the rampant profiteering by B&Q (owned by Kingfisher) and its subcontractors. Its pre-tax profits for the first half of last year increased by 42 percent to £27.3 million while Kingfisher pre-tax profits soared for the year up to March 2021 by 634 percent to £736 million. Workers were kept on the job throughout the lockdowns faced with the risk of infection and long-term illness or death for a company retailing non-essential items such as DIY products and garden furniture.

While Unite called the strike, it has enforced the isolation of the dispute by warehouse workers even as conditions exist for a broader fightback within the workplace and across the logistics and distribution network of B&Q.

The ability of B&Q to conduct any operations from the Worksop site during the strike has relied upon Unite stalling industrial action by lorry drivers at the distribution centre who work for another subcontractor, GXO. This has been the case even though they are involved in a drawn-out dispute over pay.

It is now a month since Unite reported in a press release of spreading "industrial unrest" across the B&Q distribution network, with GXO lorry drivers at the Cambuslang distribution centre having voted for strike

action with the “potential for drivers in Doncaster and Worksop to down tools.”

In the hands of Unite this has remained an empty threat. The purpose of General Secretary Sharon Graham drawing attention to this development was not to organise a joint fight but to call on B&Q to “step in” to avoid one.

The GXO lorry drivers at Cambuslang voted unanimously to strike last December, but the union has not provided any updates including possible action at Worksop.

In opposition to mobilising workers, Unite has staged protests outside B&Q retail outlets and a demonstration at the jobs fair held by local Conservative MP Brendan Clarke-Smith for Bassetlaw on January 28.

Striking Wincanton workers informed *Nottingham Live* how they were forced to resort to foodbanks with their low wages gutted by rising inflation. One explained, “Our local MP is arrogant telling us to upskill and save money by not being part of a union. It's us little people who make millions for those people at the top of the company but they don't pass any of that down to us.”

Referring to B&Q and Wincanton, Unite regional officer Paresch Patel stated in the Unite press release announcing the protest, “These are very profitable companies who can clearly afford to pay decent wages and Mr. Clarke-Smith should be standing up for his constituents by saying exactly that.”

Clarke-Smith's response was predictably an arrogant dismissal, asserting that Wincanton workers should be grateful for their £9.96 hourly wage as it was more than the Living Wage and the proposed pay rise was more than most workers earn, including in the National Health Service.

The leverage campaign advanced by Unite is based on winning the ear of the corporate boardrooms and political establishment, trying to keep alive the myth of responsible employers as workers enter into conflict with the major corporations. In return for meagre uplifts in pay, it promises to remove any strife in industrial relations as workers are left defenceless against the spread of COVID-19 and the unending demands for productivity increases.

Graham issued a response objecting to the call made by Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey last week for workers to abandon demands for pay rises stating,

“Pay restraint is nothing more than a call for a national pay cut.”

In practice, however, this is precisely what Unite has implemented. Just prior to Christmas the union blocked strike action by thousands of distribution workers and lorry drivers at Morrisons and Tesco to impose pay agreements of 5 percent and 5 .5 percent respectively on behalf of the mega rich companies.

Unite is rarely out of talks at the arbitration service ACAS to avert or suspend strike action. The union suspended a week-long strike due to have started this Monday by 400 lorry drivers and distribution workers at XPO Transport Solutions across its UK sites. This would have impacted supplies to the car industry including Mazda and VW as well as Tata Steel. It is balloting workers over a revised deal it describes as sub-standard and does not recommend, which is a result of talks held last week to forestall a strike. It has isolated the all-out strike action since December 17 by 70 workers at CHEP Ltd in Greater Manchester from the rest of the national workforce of over 1,000 employees at 27 sites and has pegged workers' demands back to a 5 percent increase.

Workers are confronted with wresting control from the hands of the union bureaucracy to expand and unify their struggles. No meaningful concessions can be won outside of an uncompromising repudiation of the profit diktats of the employers and big business.

Wincanton workers at Worksop B&Q should reject the revised offer and the attempts by Unite to sell their fight short. A rank-and-file committee should be established to overcome the divisions between warehouse workers and lorry drivers enforced by Unite. This must be connected with a unified fightback across the B&Q network of distribution centres against the company and its sub-contractors.



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