

Unite ends Worksop B&Q distribution centre strike with below inflation pay agreement

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16 February 2022

Wincanton warehouse workers returned to work last Sunday after a seven-week all-out strike at the B&Q distribution centre in Worksop in the East Midlands, based on a revised pay offer drawn up by Unite and the company.

The workers had taken two weeks of alternate strike action from the end of last November before its escalation on Christmas Eve.

Unite proclaimed another “victory,” presenting the pay agreement as a 10.7 percent award. It has massaged the figure to conceal another below-inflation pay deal.

The actual hourly pay increase for Wincanton workers is 6.75 percent, below the current rate of RPI inflation of 7.5 percent. The 10.7 percent claim by Unite is a concoction, its February 11 press release describes it as “the equivalent.” This is arrived at by including the one-off £250 COVID bonus payment (an insult in itself) and the fact that the pay award is backdated to July. This type of false accounting is what every company employs to deny workers a genuine pay rise. Unite is now recycling this underhand method to undermine the development of the class struggle and uphold its corporatist relations with mega-rich companies such as B&Q and subcontractor Wincanton.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham stated, “Our members at Wincanton in Worksop have achieved an amazing result because, with the strength of their union behind them, they refused to back down.”

The union’s actual role was to ensure that the warehouse workers remained isolated as it blocked strike action by lorry drivers across the supply lines of the B&Q network over pay with its other subcontractor, GXO. A section of low-paid workers who have mounted their first strike since the distribution centre opened 16 years ago were recommended to accept a deal by Unite which has denied them a genuine pay

increase. This is under conditions in which B&Q, Wincanton and GXO have recorded bumper profits throughout the pandemic.

Unite senior rep at Worksop Pat McGrath, in a video message announcing the ballot on the revised offer two weeks ago, admitted the union confronted opposition to the deal, which it hoped would go through. He referred to the fact that there was “still a lot of people upset about how they have been treated.”

The policing of such opposition forms a major challenge for the unions in enforcing substandard agreements. The acceptance of the revised offer was by a 78 percent majority with 284 votes in favour and 82 voting against.

Given the manufactured euphoria Unite has tried to generate around the acceptance, with no evidence provided, the opposition of one in five workers is significant. Even after seven weeks of strike action on the minimal subsistence of £70 a day provided by the union, 20 percent of strikers voted to continue the action. They placed no trust in Unite’s claim that it was the best available offer.

The ballot turnout also shows a high rate of abstention. At least 450 Unite members were reported to have participated in the strike action by the union, but the total number of votes cast was 366—a shortfall of nearly 20 percent.

The role of the pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party should not be lost on those workers opposing the deal sanctioned by Unite. The SWP’s response was to deny any rank-and-file resistance.

Unite embargoed any public reporting of the revised deal during the balloting as it exerted pressure on workers to accept. However, the *Socialist Worker* newspaper could be relied on by the bureaucracy to

bolster its authority and present a rose-tinted view of the offer. Even before the final vote was announced last Friday, the SWP newspaper presented it as a done deal, with Unite enjoying the unanimous confidence of the workers.

Its article on February 8 headlined “Strikes win a new offer” promoted the 6.7 percent offer and one-off bonus claiming that they would pave the way for a more successful struggle led by the union in the upcoming pay negotiations in July for 2022/3.

“Pat McGrath the union branch secretary said, ‘We will be back into talks before July. The members have been magnificent through the dispute, and we are a stronger organisation now. Pickets will stay in place until the ballot result is known.’ A packed branch meeting, of over 300 strikers met on Saturday and re-elected the branch officers unanimously. The strikers have given a lesson to the whole union movement that striking is the way to win.”

Its subsequent article on February 14 in the aftermath of the vote falls into line with Unite and its desperate attempt to puff up the deal. After stating last week it was a 6.7 percent offer, the *Socialist Worker* now regurgitates the line that it is a 10.75 percent award.

The whitewash of this sell-out makes its belated acknowledgment of opposition a moot point: “82 workers voted to reject the offer. So there was an appetite among the strikers to win more than the deal that’s now been made. Workers rightly can see prices are rising and that there will need to be a further battle to defend and improve living standards.”

Despite the best-laid plans of the pseudo-left groups, the emerging opposition among workers is bringing forward a day of reckoning with the pro-corporate trade unions. They are not presenting a way for strikes to win, but upholding the methods used by the unions to strangle every manifestation of workers resistance to cut a shabby deal with the employers.

The WSWS called for a rejection of the deal and elaborated a way forward:

“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 subcontractors.”

This was advanced in opposition to the role of Unite and other unions in suppressing a strike wave over pay by more than 20,000 workers across the distribution network against three of the four main supermarkets. The reason why Wincanton workers in Worksop stood alone was because Unite enforced a 5 percent deal at Morrisons in November on 1,000 workers and then combined with USDAW to call off action in December by over 12,000 lorry drivers and warehouse workers to recommend another below-inflation agreement. The GMB has forestalled strike action over the same period and is attempting to deter a strike by 8,000 distribution workers at ASDA over another derisory pay award.

The real lesson of the Wincanton strike and all these disputes is that workers struggles must be taken out of the hands of the trade unions, which function as a frontline industrial police force against any genuine fight against the major corporations and their naked self-enrichment.



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