

“This year it seems like people are fighting back and companies can’t get away with it anymore”

UK pallet workers at Chep, Manchester speak on three month strike

Dennis Moore, Margot Miller
7 March 2022

Around 70 workers at Chep UK in Trafford Park, Greater Manchester, are continuing their indefinite pay strike, begun on December 17.

The Unite union members, who make pallets and other containers for food and beverage companies like Heinz and Heineken, are paid £1,000 less than workers at the other six Chep sites in the UK. They voted 75 percent to strike against a derisory 1.5 percent offer.

After being out for 12 weeks, Chep workers re-balloted to continue their stoppage against a revised offer of 2 percent, with 94 percent in favour, despite workers struggling on £70 a day strike pay, such is their determination.

Chep is an international company owned by Brambles, with headquarters in Sydney, Australia. Operating in 45 countries and employing 7,500 workers, Chep deals in pallets and container pooling services without which supply chains would break down.

WSWS reporters spoke to some of the picketing strikers. One explained that since the stoppage began, workers have manned a 24-hour picket line, Monday to Friday.

“They want two-year deals, so we don't go back in and out again,” he said. “Some people say the workers are greedy, and the company is struggling, but they’re not struggling. They've got directors in there on £500,000 and another one who got a £200,000 bonus,” he continued. “They made somewhere between £122,000 and £130,000 per worker in profit. So, who are the greedy ones?”

“They've given the shareholders £200 million in two years in dividends. All we were looking for is 5 percent, we’re not even pushing for the RPI [retail prices index inflation] that stands at 7.8 percent.”

While workers are meant to accept a real-terms pay cut,

Chep recorded profits of £150 million last year! According to Unite, Chep accounts registered at Companies House for 2019-2020 rose 173 percent.

The company employs around 100 workers at Trafford Park, including fitters, nine forklift truck drivers who cover three shifts over 24 hours and bench men, all in the same union Unite. But Unite have not called these workers out.

When asked what action Unite have organised to broaden the strike, the worker replied, “I've no idea. We do have people come down from other places who've got their own strikes. We sent people down to the buses [in support of a female bus driver threatened with the sack at the Go North West bus company] in support. We've got Bolton Trades Council coming today. We've had a lot of support from the passing public, bringing food.”

Another picket said, “Everyone's had enough! They've stood up for themselves. We're sick of them taking, all the time. You know you have got a value, but to them it seems you've no value. You just feel you're not being treated right.

“The money is not being passed down. It's the people at the bottom who make the money, that's where the money starts. The company had been asked a question by a union official. To get us all back in it would cost £67,000 for everything, that would be the cost to the company.

“We've got the 5 percent, but the downside of that is that they will only pay that from when we go back in, no back pay, hence the one-off payment [on offer]. So, we would lose all the back pay going back to July 1.

“With the whole COVID situation, I worked through it including in my previous job, where I was made redundant. These lads worked through it. You now see things in a whole different light.

“We worked through the whole of the pandemic and the profits are going through the roof. That’s the irony of it, the money being made was unbelievable.”

A fellow picket added, “This year it seems like people are fighting back. They have had enough, and companies can’t get away with it anymore.”

Another mentioned the increase in the cost of diesel and said the 5 percent pay rise would not cover that, and the pay demand “is below what we should be asking for.”

Asked his opinion of the NATO driven war in the Ukraine, a picket declared, “There must be some kind of monetary thing underneath it. I know there’s something going on there.”

After the second ballot to continue strike action, Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham said, “Management needs to get serious and come back with a pay rise, not a cut in living standards.” But Unite, in asking for a pay rise of 5 percent with the retail price index running at 7.8 percent and expected to rise, is negotiating a cut in living standards.

Unite has become notorious for separating strikes in order to betray them, settling for below inflation pay deals across different sectors of industry and then crying victory. This includes a 3 percent sell-out deal at Manchester Metrolink, and derisory deals agreed at different bus companies throughout Britain. Unite refuse to oppose a strikebreaking operation in Coventry by a Labour-controlled local authority where bin workers are out.

The replacement of former Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey with Graham, hailed by pseudo-left groups including the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party as the “workers’ candidate”, made no difference. The trade unions are corporatist organisations, defending the profit interests of the corporations at the expense of wages and conditions.

The Labour and trade union bureaucracy are anti-working class and anti-socialist, wedded to the interests of capitalism. This was underlined at an online meeting held on January 12 by Manchester Trades Union Council (TUC), on the issue of “Solidarity with the Chep strike”.

The meeting was chaired by Manchester TUC executive committee member Ian Allinson, who helped sugar-coat Unite’s sell-out agreement at Go North West buses after an eleven week strike. This deal included reduced sick pay, lengthening the working day, unpaid meal breaks and compulsory overtime.

After the Go North West strike, a worker, summing up the general feeling, said “The union have sold us down

the river.”

One of the speakers at the “Solidarity with the Chep” strike meeting was Labour MP for Salford and Eccles Rebecca Long-Bailey, a member of Labour’s shadow cabinet under Jeremy Corbyn, and of the Socialist Campaign Group. In a hymn to union-management collusion and betrayal, she said it was “fantastic that Chep is enjoying a boom time and is making substantial profits... In trade union workplaces, where you’ve got a company with a bit of give and take, in the good times they [employees] get paid more, that means you’ve got a happy workforce. And it means that in the event that anything terrible happens to the company, those workers will remember they were treated well, and they’ll offer flexibility, and they might offer to work less hours for less pay until you get good times again... This is about Chep doing well as much as it is about employees getting the pay they deserve.”

The solidarity Long-Bailey offers is to Chep management and shareholders, grown rich on the hard work of workers.

At the end of the meeting, Allinson announced the upcoming annual general meeting of Manchester Trades Council, which had a “stellar line-up” including Graham.

Workers should draw lessons from the long list of disputes sabotaged by Unite. A unified fight of workers employed by global corporations is needed, including across nations. Workers must build their own rank and file committees in every workplace, independent of the unions that have overseen an erosion of workers’ livelihoods over decades and are keeping workers on the job in unsafe workplaces during the pandemic.



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