

Thousands of ASDA distribution workers in the UK vote for strike action

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Asda distribution workers have voted overwhelmingly to reject a miserable pay deal and move forward to industrial action. The offer was for a raise of between 5-7 percent depending on location, 65p per hour for warehouse and clerical staff and 98p for drivers.

Nearly 70 percent of the 8,000 workers rejected the offer, and nearly 80 percent endorsed industrial action. This is the second time in as many months workers have voted decisively for a strike. In December 2021, over 94 percent rejected an earlier zero percent pay offer. Workers are increasingly aware of the raw deal they have received over the last few years, having worked tirelessly through the pandemic only to watch the shareholders get rich while their pay stagnated.

In February 2021, Asda was sold by Walmart to the EG Group (founded and managed by billionaires Mohsin Issa and Zuber Issa) and TDR Capital (a private equity firm) for £6.8 billion. Walmart took £2.9 billion out of Asda in dividends ahead of the sale. The new ownership structure means GE Group and TDR Capital own the majority of the company while Walmart maintains an ongoing equity investment. Asda made £368 million in profits after tax in 2020.

It was Asda workers on poverty wages who produced these profits, forced to risk infection with COVID-19 to do so. In November 2020, one worker told *Bristol Live* that around 40 colleagues at the company's Avonmouth distribution centre were self-isolating with symptoms. She explained, "Other staff are not being told to isolate and the centre remains open, so it just keeps spreading and they just keep getting new staff in to replace those off sick."

The GMB union have responded to the latest ballot results not by organising action but by arranging "talks" with Asda. An alarm must be sounded. Workers must urgently take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy, who are trying to sell it out.

The GMB opened the ballot on January 31 and closed it February 14. However, the union remained tight-lipped about the result for over a week. It finally tweeted on February 22, "NEW: Asda distribution workers have voted to reject a below inflation pay offer".

The news was cheered by several ASDA and other workers in the comments, demonstrating the militant sentiment the union is sitting on: "Worked all the way throughout the pandemic... We deserve so much more", "Remember they were patronized with the key worker label. Truth is they don't care about the working class", "Good on them. We're supposed to live not merely exist", "That's good. Workers shouldn't be forced to accept crummy wages", "Are we heading for a summer of discontent? I hope so."

This result is not what the GMB wanted. The union cynically did not attach a recommendation to Asda's offer while making clear that it would not support workers if they voted for a struggle.

The vote itself followed years of delay and demobilisation, including by burying a pay dispute at the start of the pandemic in talks with ACAS, resulting in a pro-company deal, and engaging in obviously pointless discussions with Asda management for much of the second part of last year.

The same tactics have been deployed against distribution workers' struggles at Tesco and Morrison's by the Unite and USDAW unions. Ballots for strike action involving more than 6,000 workers overall last November-December were divided and successively

sold out for below-inflation deals: 5 percent at Morrisons and 6 percent at Tesco.

This division of workers is not accidental, but rather a conscious policy of all the major unions to smother the class struggle and prevent unified action across all the major supermarkets and the working class more broadly.

Workers are even divided within companies. Distribution workers' rejection of the ASDA pay deal follows the imposition of a 3.5 percent pay "rise" for Asda retail workers, negotiated behind their backs by USDAW. The GMB described the deal as an "outrage" but would not criticise USDAW directly or call for action.

Both the GMB and USDAW, along with Unite, are stringing retail workers along at all the main supermarkets with fair pay legal battles, claiming the majority female retail workforce are unfairly discriminated against versus the predominantly male distribution workers. Asda staff have already been led through eight years of legal wrangling. The purpose of these interminable and divisive claims is to use the legal process as an excuse to suppress the class struggle.

Asda distribution workers have begun to break free from these shackles and taken an important step in rejecting the company's deal. Now they must take the next and begin the organisation of a struggle.

No faith can be placed in the unions. Even if the GMB eventually feel forced to call a strike, all experience shows that they will work to reach a deal favourable to the company, only to declare it a "win".

B&Q warehouse workers at the Worksop depot run by Wincanton recently waged a courageous seven-week strike over pay. But it was kept isolated by Unite and led to a below-inflation deal, a 6.75 percent increase in hourly pay. The union proclaimed a victory, manipulating the figures, including an insulting one-off £250 COVID bonus, to present the agreement as a 10.7 percent award.

Carrying a strike at Asda through to a genuinely successful conclusion, winning back the losses of the last decade, requires a new political perspective for struggle—the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions. At the start of February, the *World Socialist Web Site* called for workers to reject ASDA's pay deal but warned:

"[T]he 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 "renumeration 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."

The basis for such a struggle exists. Workers in the sector continue to come forward for a fight to defend their living standards. Over 250 Sainsbury's warehouse workers based in Bristol, employed by logistics giant DHL on an outsourced contract, are now balloting for strike action over low wages—the poorest paid earn just £11.22 an hour.

More will come forward as the cost-of-living crisis worsens. To succeed, they must draw the lessons from the from the Tesco, Morrisons and Asda disputes of the last five months.



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