

P&O Ferries sack 800 workers on-the-spot in class war offensive

Robert Stevens
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In a major escalation of the class struggle, P&O Ferries sacked its entire 800 crew workforce Thursday with immediate effect. The firm said it intended to reemploy a new agency-based workforce.

There was no warning by P&O, owned by container and logistics conglomerate DP World. P&O halted all crossings and ordered its ships back to port before firing its workforce ahead of releasing an announcement later in the afternoon.

The company said its actions were necessary as it was “not a viable business” having lost around £250 million over two years. It warned of “significant disruption” as passengers were left stranded desperately trying to make alternative arrangements. The firm operates four routes: Dover to Calais; Hull to Rotterdam; Liverpool to Dublin; and Cairnryan, Scotland, to Larne, Northern Ireland.

In a cost-cutting operation its Hull/Zeebrugge, Belgium, sailings were axed in January 2021. Prior to the pandemic it carried more than 10 million passengers a year and about 15 percent of all freight cargo in and out of Britain.

As part of its brutal pre-planned operation, P&O had a scab workforce of agency workers waiting at docksides in uniform ready to board the ferries.

P&O mobilised private security guards to remove sacked crews off its ships. Workers shot social media footage of men in balaclavas entering ships. The *Daily Mail* reported that the hired goons were told they were on a job that “would last a week and be paid at £14.50 an hour.”

The *Daily Telegraph* revealed an email sent to the goons from a private security firm last week reading, “You have been selected to deploy on a task in Dover that will be fairly high profile. This task will run for 1 week... the client we are assisting requires 16 officers

(handcuff-trained) to support their security teams in the unlikely event some of their staff become challenging.

“Essentially, our client will be informing staff of redundancies and there is a possible risk of backlash... You will all need your uniform including cuffs and utility belt.” The instructions ended, “You will not need body armour for this task.”

One woman whose husband and son have lost their jobs in Dover told the press, “When P&O suspended sailings this morning, crews were waiting on the ships with no idea what was happening—even the captains didn’t know... They were told they had five minutes to get their stuff and get off the ships.

“These guys are week on week off workers who have called these ships home for half of the year every year. They have personal effects in lockers which they can’t get to—clothes, bedding, photographs and in some cases financial documents which will be taken out and thrown.”

Workers onboard ships were dismissed on a pre-recorded Zoom call. A company boss read out a three-minute message declaring that all serving crew members would be fired and replaced by a third-party company. It concluded, “You are terminated with immediate effect on the grounds of redundancy.”

In its later statement, P&O said, “We have made a £100 million loss year on year, which has been covered by our parent DP World. This is not sustainable. Our survival is dependent on making swift and significant changes now. Without these changes, there is no future for P&O Ferries.”

This from a firm owned by DP World that has awarded hundreds of millions of pounds in bonuses to its directors during the course of the pandemic, while helping themselves to taxpayer-funded bailouts. DP World is owned by Dubai’s sovereign wealth fund and

chaired by billionaire Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem. It reported a profit of \$896 million (£683 million) last year.

The sackings are the second massive tranche since DP World took over P&O and puts the remaining 2,200 staff on notice. DP World bought P&O Ferries for £322 million in 2019, just months before the pandemic struck. Its first move as it paid a £270 million dividend to shareholders at the end of April 2020 was to fire, with no opposition from the trade unions, 1,100 of P&O's workforce insisting this was necessary to keep it "viable and sustainable".

P&O's owners applied for a £150 million bailout from the government. This was refused but DP World received an undisclosed figure from the taxpayer to keep freight routes from the UK running and almost £15 million to pay 80 percent of the wages of 1,400 furloughed staff.

Workers on P&O ships did whatever they could to oppose their removal from vessels. At Dover, numbers refused to leave ships as others gathered at the port and confronted security staff and police backing the company operation. Workers blocked the road and told lorry drivers and others trying to enter the port that "we're not moving". The *Daily Mail* reported one sacked worker saying, "I refuse to move from this road, all this service for nothing. The police will have to take me away."

In Hull, the captain of the *Pride of Hull* ferry, after hearing of the redundancies, drew up the gangplanks refusing to allow police or scabs on the ship. According to reports, the ship had enough supplies to feed the crew for as "long as it takes."

At Larne in Northern Ireland, staff staged a sit-in before eventually departing the vessel.

The trade union bureaucracy and Labour Party moved immediately to assert a nationalist response to P&O's actions. Neither the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), nor the small Nautilus International professional body called industrial action in response to a brutal dismissal of their members, even though reports suggested that the company may have acted illegally on several grounds.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch said, "We are deeply disturbed by growing speculation that the company are today planning to sack hundreds of UK seafarers and replace them with foreign labour."

The general secretary of the Nautilus International maritime union, Mark Dickinson, said, "The news that P&O Ferries is sacking crew across its entire UK fleet is a betrayal of British workers. It is nothing short of scandalous given that this Dubai-owned company received millions of pounds of British taxpayer's money during the pandemic."

In Parliament, Labour Shadow Transport Secretary Louise Haigh described the sackings as a "national scandal" which is "beneath contempt", before calling on the Conservative government to intervene to save the jobs. The government put on a show of concern but offered nothing more than a pledge to speak to employers and the unions.

Ferry workers cannot look to the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions, or any section of the ruling elite to defend jobs. They are up against a global company, with massive resources employing 50,000 workers in 40 countries worldwide. In addition, as has already been made clear, ferry workers will be confronted with police attacks as the state is mobilised against them.

Ferry workers must form their own rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to occupy ships and ports. They must turn to the working class, calling for solidarity strikes to be mounted in every workplace including by ferry and port workers in Europe and internationally to put a halt to corporations' exploiting national divisions. They should pose the question to their fellow workers: if P&O gets away with this, then who will be next? This is a fight for the future of the entire working class. To discuss the way forward, we appeal to P&O workers to **contact the Socialist Equality Party**.



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