

Protests at four UK ports against the sacking of 800 P&O ferry crew workers

Our reporters
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Demonstrations were held against P&O's mass sacking Thursday of 800 ferry workers at the ports of Dover, Hull, Liverpool and Larne on Friday.

Hundreds of workers took part, angered by the summary dismissal of its workforce by P&O in scenes not witnessed since the mass police operations against striking miners and printworkers in the mid-1980s.

Workers were sacked without warning in a Zoom call, after the company, owned by container and logistics conglomerate DP World, halted all crossing in the four routes it operates: Dover to Calais; Hull to Rotterdam; Liverpool to Dublin; and Cairnryan, Scotland, to Larne, Northern Ireland.

The path was cleared for a scab workforce to move in by security guards dragooning ferry workers onto the docks, taking whatever belongings they could muster together in plastic bin bags.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, Nautilus International and the Labour Party called the protests based on appeals to Prime Minister Boris Johnson to either force a retreat by DP World, or even to nationalise the company—something the government said immediately was a non-starter.

These bankrupt calls go some way to explaining the absence of P&O workers at the protest in Liverpool and Hull. P&O workers who did attend the protest at Dover were confronted with the nauseating sight of local Conservative MP Natalie Elphicke holding a “Save Britain's ferries” banner alongside former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn's Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. When she attempted to speak P&O workers made their views clear by chanting, “We hate Tories, we are the Tory haters” and shouting, “You're on their side,” “You voted for fire and rehire,” contracts and “Shame on you.”

This was the first response to the sickening outpouring of feigned sympathy by the likes of Transport Secretary Grant Shapps, Defence Minister James Heappey and Johnson himself, who claimed to be shocked at events. Yesterday it emerged that the Tories had been told of P&O's plans.

Johnson's official spokesperson had said on Thursday, “We weren't given any notice to this.” But sources at the Department for Transport admitted they were made aware of the impending mass sackings and suspension of ferry services on Wednesday evening, but “had kept the information within a small group because of concerns about commercial sensitivity.”

Little wonder. Far more is at stake than the £300-£400 million involved in DP World's bargain-basement acquisition of P&O, let alone the £10 million jobs furlough payments it claimed during the pandemic.

DP World last November took over running of Thames Freeport, the first of 10 such ventures that form the bedrock of the Tory Party's post-Brexit economic strategy.

UK freeports (free trade zones) are based on the slashing or waiving of tariffs on imports so that the UK can undercut its European rivals. Thames Freeport itself boast that “the new status will provide £5.1 billion (\$7.06

billion) additional Gross Value Added (GVA) and over £4.5 billion (\$6.23 billion) in new public and private investment to the national economy.

DP World is, moreover, owned by the United Arab Emirates government, which Johnson this week was begging to increase oil production to compensate for the loss of supplies due to sanctions on Russia. Its chairman is the billionaire Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, but UAE Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum is the majority stakeholder in Dubai World, the parent company of DP World.

The other political consideration for the Tories is that P&O are helping to set a new benchmark in the super-exploitation of the working class that is their number one goal. A sacked worker at Hull told the *Daily Mail* that “the agency workers brought in to replace them were on as little as £2 to £3 an hour, compared with the £28 to £30 hourly rate paid to British sailors.”

It is now known that the agency staff recruited by P&O also included workers from the UK who knew nothing about what they were being used for. Mark Canet-Baldwin, an Australian living in Hull, told the BBC he was hired a week ago. After a “mystery bus tour” from Glasgow to the P&O dock in Cairnryan, he and others realised what was happening. He and other agency workers then walked away. “I couldn't look my kids in the eye if I did something like this,” he said.

None of this has changed the tune of the union bureaucracy and the Labour Party, with Shadow Transport Secretary Louise Haigh urging the government to “stand up for loyal workers in Britain” and RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch claiming, in true little-Englander fashion, “The fact that the government knew the day before that a foreign owned company planned to cause major disruption to UK ports but did nothing to prevent it is shocking.”

“Shocking” only to Lynch and company. His aim in focusing on foreign sabotage of the UK economy is to suppress the wave of anger generated by P&O and channel it into appeals to the government and a legal case for unfair dismissal when protesters at Dover were chanting “Seize the ships now!” and “Whose ships? Our ships.”

Ferry workers cannot look to the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade unions, Labour or the Tory government to defend their jobs. They must form their own rank-and-file committees independent of the unions to implement the demand, occupy ships and ports. Rejecting all efforts to divide workers along national lines, they should call for solidarity action in every workplace in the UK and by ferry and port workers in Europe and internationally.

Dover

Around 500 P&O workers, their families and supporters rallied in Dover to protest Thursday's mass sackings. After workers jeered local Tory MP

Natalie Elphicke, it was the Rail Maritime and Transport union's Mick Lynch who sought to tamp down workers' anger.

Lynch told the crowd he had spoken with Sir Keir Starmer via Zoom, eliciting boos from workers. He said Labour's leader had shown "support" for sacked P&O workers and declared, "We're going to get some stuff going on Monday in parliament."

To undercut workers' denunciations of Elphicke, Lynch told P&O workers, "What we need now is action across the political spectrum." He claimed that P&O's actions had united politicians from Labour, the Tories and even the Democratic Unionist Party in support of workers, "and today we're going to support unity, no matter where you've come from."

Former Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell appealed to the militant mood of workers, saying they should give the government until Monday to take over P&O's ships, and that failing that, they should be seized. The prospect of McDonnell seizing P&O's ships is to say the least remote.

Many workers had expected the rally would blockade the port. As they marched from Maritime House to the docks, they chanted, "Seize the ships." At the dock's entrance, a speaker from the International Transport Federation described tremendous shock and anger of seafarers across Europe over P&O's attack, but no action was proposed. The protest was wound up outside P&O headquarters on Channel View Road.

Michael, a P&O seafarer, told the WSWS, "This is going to have a huge impact. I have got a family at home, bills to pay, debts to pay like everyone else, and everything is going up. These ships were our homes. We spend half our lives on them. We have personal effects still on these ships.

"It will have a major impact on employment in the area. There is already very little work. We have to maintain this fight. This cannot be allowed to stand. We deserve better, everyone deserves better."

Gordon explained, "My granddaughter's husband is a captain on P&O. They told him at 11 a.m. yesterday, that was it. They are attacking our jobs, it's disgusting. When I was at sea there were 40,000 registered seafarers. Now there is only 12,000. The whole industry has been decimated. It's going to be devastating locally. All these companies do is divide and conquer. They use it all the time. It's scandalous they can get away with it. I lost my job with P&O in the 1980s. The unions let us down then and maybe they will let the workers down again."

Trudi explained, "I do not work in the shipping sector but I do work in transport. Seafarers do a fantastic job. I'm here in defence of a good secure job. No one in any sector can afford to lose their job at the drop of a hat like this and be replaced with cheap labour. What qualifications do these scabs get in this industry? Safety is paramount.

"Companies like P&O have taken every penny they can, and have paid out massive dividends. The way this has been carried out is disgusting. People will have less money in their pockets, and it is going to have a massive impact on Dover."

Margaret travelled from London to join the rally. "My son is a seafarer and lost his job yesterday after 10 years," she said. "This will be devastating for Dover. The way it was done is atrocious. The whole shipping industry should be nationalised. What has not been reported is that P&O are building two new ships in China. Is it necessary to get rid of these workers if they are building new ships? These companies do not give a damn about workers. My son may have to transfer to a new work environment and there are very few job opportunities for him. His job was his life."

A **DFDS (passenger ferry) seafarer** told our reporters, "I'm here to support my P&O colleagues. It is important to be here today to oppose the sackings. It could be us next."

Liverpool

At Liverpool **Tommy**, who works for Stenna Lines, said, "I have been a tug driver for 20 years I have been Tuped over several times (when workers are transferred from one employer to another.) At the start of the pandemic the company had wanted to cut the sick pay from 100 percent to 50. We ended up with 75."

Another tug driver employed by Stenna Lines said, "Workers have to unite and our history shows us that is the only way to stop what is taking place. We should have stopped the rot with [Tory Prime Minister Margaret] Thatcher because since then the working class have been driven back. It's not only wages, it's conditions. We have to stop what's happening to P&O lads because if we don't it will happen to us all."

Liam McGuire, a solicitor, said, "It's scandalous what has happened to these workers and it's the thin end of the wedge. Other so-called worker-friendly employers will do it. Especially with the pandemic, which is being used by employers to take extreme action to cut jobs and conditions. The changing conditions in the pandemic showed how flexible workers can be and that is now being used against us.

"We have to show they can't get away with this because if we tolerate it, it will get worse. P&O is a test. We have to say don't push us too far because we will push back. Cutting jobs, and conditions under cover of COVID, and now the war in Ukraine, is class war and they want to drive the working class back to the conditions of the 1800s."

Ex-seafarer and ex-teacher **Terry** said "The news this morning showed P&O workers being ejected from their ship. It's outrageous. To defend jobs, I would break the law but people are in fear... They don't realize, everyone has to down tools to win the fight. The system can't work without us. The unions have changed, they're not what they used to be."

Ian George works for Stenna Lines and has worked at sea for 42 years. "I used to work for P&O," he said. "I worked for them last year. There are terrible conditions. The ship I was working on, nothing was working. The cabins were horrendous, the toilets weren't fixed. I came today for solidarity. Workers' rights are taken away every day. United we stand, divided we fall. Things have got to change."

Former teacher **Ade** travelled from Birmingham. "My father in law worked for P&O. He would have been disgusted."

Teachers were also under attack, Ade said. "We have the youngest teaching force in the OECD [countries], the older teachers have been forced out. There used to be robust structures in the local authorities with a chief medical officer. How do we put in place a plan now to meet the needs of kids in the pandemic? When these decisions are made in Westminster, it's not surprising mistakes are made."

Hull

In **Hull**, a crew member on the *Pride of Hull* explained that he wasn't on shift when the security force were sent onboard the ship. "I've worked here about 30 years. A lot of us have been here quite a long time. We're staying here until we get some reassurances, get some sort of payment, clarify what is going on.

"I think there were about 50 British crew on the ship. And there would have been about 80 Filipino staff. They clean the cabins and the kitchens, etc.

"Once the cargo was off and they'd shut everything down, about 11 in the morning, I believe the door was locked by the crew to stop anyone getting on board. The threat was if you didn't leave the vessel, you would lose your redundancy package. They wanted you off the ship with as little fuss as possible. It's disgusting what they've done."

Former P&O worker **George**, made redundant in 1991, said, "How can you call this a democracy if you treat workers like this? If they can do this

here, they can do it anywhere and to anyone.”

A former **P&O shoreside worker** said she was not surprised at how badly the firm had treated its workforce. “They were the worst company I have ever worked for.

“Where is the picket? There should be a strike. They’ve got to put a ballot for a strike. We need to get all the shoreside workers to strike with them. They should just bring it to them.”



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