

P&O resumes sailings with workers on £1.82 an hour

Robert Stevens
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Downing Street was directly involved in P&O's sacking of 800 ferry workers last Thursday. The Johnson government's lies that it had no prior knowledge are in tatters.

The crews were sacked via a three-minute Zoom call. Workers were removed from their ships by paid balaclava-wearing, handcuff-trained thugs.

The *Evening Standard* reported Saturday, "Despite previously claiming to be unaware of plans to sack staff, [Prime Minister Boris Johnson's] spokesperson confirmed some officials had been informed by P&O, a day before it was announced on Wednesday."

The *Sunday Times* provided details showing that such massive attacks on livelihoods are never simply devised just by the companies involved, but pitch workers against the government and the state. A briefing memo drawn up by a senior government official was circulated across Whitehall a day ahead of the operation. The memo declared, "We understand that P&O Ferries have an intention to try and re-employ many staff on new terms and conditions or use agency staff to restart routes; they estimate disruption to services lasting 10 days."

The brutal action was necessary as "These changes will align them [P&O] with other companies in the market who have undertaken a large reduction in staff."

According to reports, P&O is paying replacements from India, the Philippines and Ukraine as little as £1.82 an hour. The UK minimum wage is £8.91 for workers aged over 23.

P&O has already been able to resume some of its main routes, with the Liverpool-Dublin ships back to normal by Saturday. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union said that "two P&O ships on the Liverpool-Dublin route which have been crewed with Filipino Ratings... were on contracts which paid a basic rate of

\$3.47 per hour." The RMT also reported that "P&O ferry crews at Dover have been replaced by Indian seafarers being paid \$2.38 an hour."

The RMT, the Nautilus union and the Labour Party claim to be leading a heroic struggle to defend the sacked workers. But this assault on workers' livelihoods has been taking place in the ferry and shipping industry for years, with the complicity of the trade unions.

Even the type of attack mounted last Thursday was already carried out by Irish Ferries in 2005. Irish Ferries "reflagged" to Cyprus three Irish Sea ferries to drive down labour costs and conditions. It offered redundancy to a third of its workforce so as to replace them with lower-paid workers from central and eastern Europe. On November 24, 2005, the company hired security guards to board the *Isle of Inishmore* in an attempt to seize control of the vessel. New staff also boarded the ferry at the same time.

The mass firings sparked a 20-day strike, which was ended by the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union reaching a three-year agreement with Irish Ferries that accepted redundancy for hundreds of its members and their replacement by agency workers employed by a Cyprus-based recruitment firm. The foreign crews were paid the minimum wage of just €7.65 (£5.19) per hour and the union promised no further industrial action.

The main complaint of the RMT and Nautilus is that P&O did not consult them on how to get rid of the workers. Had P&O done so, the result would have been the same. Less than two years ago, as the pandemic hit, P&O was able to shed 1,100 jobs by making them redundant with the complicity of the RMT.

Ferry companies have exploited for years the fact that UK employment laws exempt shipping companies from

paying the national minimum wage if the crew does not reside in Britain. Companies routinely register their ships in foreign countries, enabling them to flout any employment laws. In 2019, P&O Ferries reflagged its ships from Britain to countries including Cyprus and the Bahamas.

On Tuesday, RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch revealed more than he intended about what the union knew and had not opposed. He explained, “We were due to have a meeting with the business on Friday, then on Thursday they sacked all our members.”

Labour MP Karl Turner admitted, “P&O has accepted previously in meetings with me and the RMT, they’ve said \$2.40 an hour (£1.82).”

On the [Hull-based] *Pride of Rotterdam*, “they work eight weeks on and two weeks off,” he said. “They do 12-hour shifts with a short break to eat... They get terrible multioccupancy-type accommodation in Hull, very often staying in hostels for about £9 a night. Some have been known to pitch tents for a fortnight.”

Media reports from January 2020 show that the RMT knew that P&O had recruited around 100 Filipino workers to displace workers mainly hailing from Portugal and Lithuania, to set a new benchmark for low pay at £1.74 an hour (less than £70 a week). Lynch said pathetically that the union had raised the issue at the time with Tory government ministers, who view such conditions as a benchmark for every UK firm.

The pay levels being imposed by P&O have been sanctioned by the International Transport Federation trade union body and International Labour Organization. Yesterday, ITV News Business and Economics Editor Joel Hills tweeted, “The ITF/ILO minimum recommended rate for an Ordinary Seaman (OS) - usually the lowest rank on a ship - is \$15.9/day - or \$1.99/hour for an 8 hour shift.” Hills tweeted an image of a document headed, “ITF ILO Minimum Wage Scale”, “Rates applicable from 1st January 2021.”

He noted, “P&O reportedly wants to cut its wage bill in half. Offering agency crew from India £1.80/hour (well below UK min wage of £8.91/hour) would be legal and, I’m told, competitive. Other ferry operators also use non-UK crews - from countries like Poland and the Philippines.”

The essential basis of corporate policy is the exploitation of national divisions in the working class

fostered by the trade unions. Under conditions in which workers are employed by global entities such as P&O’s owners DP World, the nationalist agenda of the trade unions results in an endless spiral to the lowest international benchmark.

DP World, based in the United Arab Emirates, are pioneers in the exploitation of workers in free trade zones, such as the Jebel Ali Free Zone (Jafza) set up in 1985. Jafza now hosts over 8,000 companies generating billions in profits. The vast wealth accrued by the Gulf State’s oligarchs depends on the exploitation of migrant labour housed in labour camps on miserable wages. P&O proves that such conditions are now being brought to Europe.

The nationalist campaign by the trade unions over the sackings is summed up by their call for Conservative Transport Secretary Grant Shapps to demand that P&O/DP World “stop this attack on the jobs and livelihoods of 800 British Seafarers” and “Save Britain’s Ferries.” This attempt to maintain pay levels in the UK without fighting to raise wages for workers in every country only guarantees the destruction of everyone’s living standards, with companies able to easily recruit a replacement workforce.

What is required is a struggle based on the historic clarion call of the revolutionary working class, “Workers of the world, unite!” Workers can only oppose the joint offensive of government and corporations by uniting their collective strength in Britain and internationally based on a socialist programme that puts the livelihoods of workers above the profits of the super-rich.

This requires a political and organisational break with the trade unions and the formation of rank-and-file committees throughout the shipping sector. In May 2021, the International Committee of the Fourth International initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). We urge P&O workers to contact the IWA-RFC today.



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