

Sacked P&O ferry workers speak out at rally in London

Our reporters
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Several hundred P&O Ferries workers and supporters held a protest outside DP World's London offices yesterday, before marching to a rally outside Parliament. Container and logistics conglomerate DP World are the owners of P&O Ferries. Last Thursday, the company sacked 800 crew members on the spot and recruited a scab workforce in its place on a fraction of their wages.

The rally was called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT). WSWs reporters spoke to some of those attending.

A sacked second officer with six years' experience at P&O told our reporters, "It's shocking the way they've done it and how they've, so far, got away with this. We've had an email about which companies would help us with finding a job, nothing more, from P&O. They haven't contacted us.

"They promised us a phone call; I've not had that. I expect they're busy since they've got 800 people to get through."

The worker had been "taken on last year" on a new contract having already been "made redundant by them the year before" in the second of two rounds of redundancies during the pandemic.

He explained, "They issued us letters saying how we were classified as key workers during the pandemic. Not so long ago they were issuing videos saying P&O is made of its people and we're what make the company. And then they get rid of anyone."

Describing the poverty pay given to the replacement workforce, he said the ferry companies were "actively seeking out countries with lower wages just to lower their costs... Irish ferries did it about 15 years ago. They did an en masse crew replacement, brought in new crew. Unfortunately, the shipping industry is one of the worst for poor conditions."

Speaking about the implications of P&O's actions, he warned, "If they can get away with it in our sector, they'll try and do it in others... The erosion of people's terms and conditions and salaries doesn't benefit anyone apart from these multinational corporations which can increase their profit margins."

"If they [P&O] have got enough money to sponsor a golf tournament and pay out a dividend to their shareholders, you would think they're doing quite well. We're not lacking freight; we're filling the ships. So, if we're not making any money out of it, something's wrong somewhere."

Describing the government's complicity as "shocking," he said of all the main parties, "I don't have much faith in any of them to be honest."

London Underground workers Martin and Des came to show "solidarity to P&O workers who were sacked, instantaneously, indiscriminately within a couple of hours—lost their job, lost their livelihoods... It's outrageous."

Des argued, "We're here outside parliament where laws are made; P&O have broken the law. The government seem to recognise that, but they're doing nothing about it. A few words here and there. Well, the government need to step in and do something."

Martin explained tube workers' common cause with ferry workers, saying Transport for London were "attacking our terms and conditions and there's nothing stopping them firing and rehiring us under different terms. In that sense, we're in the same position and everybody is.

"This is a threshold moment. If they can get away with this, then this could happen to anybody. It's taking us back to the stone age of industrial relations."

They also wanted to show solidarity with the foreign crews being super-exploited. In order to allow

companies to exploit workers on rock bottom wages, shipping companies not registered in the UK are not required to adhere to UK employment law, including paying the minimum wage. “The international waters rule is absolutely horrendous and a detriment to lower paid workers, who have to work under horrendous conditions for a pittance,” one said.

Martin said the mass firing of P&O workers was one of the first steps in the government’s freeports agenda, carried out “at the expense of ordinary workers and to the betterment of capitalism... We should put an end to it now.”

“It has to be direct intervention. That means, if necessary, going down to Dover and blocking the road, blocking the ability of P&O to operate.”



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