

RMT union promotes nationalism to block a class mobilisation against P&O Ferries and UK government

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The “Save P&O Jobs” campaign by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union is shorn of any appeal to the working class to mobilise against the mass firing of 800 workers by P&O Ferries.

It is pitched to Boris Johnson’s Conservative government, based on the nationalist appeal that they stand up for British workers against P&O’s parent company, Dubai-based DP World. The supposedly militant union has not organised any industrial action to prevent the ferries leaving port with a replacement crew, hired on a fraction of the wages paid to the sacked workers.

Nautilus International and the RMT, representing Officers and Ratings respectively, have collaborated in silencing workers over their brutal mistreatment. They have advised their members that speaking out publicly would risk a reduction in their severance package, which contains a Non-Disclosure Agreement.

Unite, which represents 160 P&O shoreside workers, has not organised any solidarity action, claiming that the overnight sacking by the company of almost a third of the workforce does not immediately affect its members.

The RMT’s response to P&O’s mass firings is a continuation of its rotten record of class collaboration and nationalism, which has laid the groundwork for the trampling under-foot of workers’ rights.

DP World could be confident that its latest act of corporate thuggery would go unanswered by the trade unions, given their acceptance of the previous round of mass redundancies at P&O Ferries less than two years ago.

In June 2020, the company announced the elimination of 1,100 jobs, including 300 port workers. The RMT recalls this sacking, organised after consultation with the union, with barely concealed nostalgia: “P&O made 600

UK seafarer redundancies during the pandemic. Whilst we completely opposed this, the full redundancy process required under UK law was observed by P&O Ferries and DP World.”

The RMT and Unite did not mobilise any opposition to the slashing of more than a thousand jobs in the middle of a pandemic, even as DP World picked up £10 million from the Johnson government to furlough 1,400 staff.

For the unions, the only principle at stake is whether they are recognised as partners in the restructuring and cost-cutting exercises of the corporations.

At the time, the RMT doubled down on its nationalist appeals to the Johnson government, pitting British seafarers against overseas crew. An RMT petition addressed to the prime minister emphasised Britain’s position as “an island nation” and P&O having been established in 1840 by Royal Charter: “Successive Governments have failed to prevent UK seafarers from being replaced by cheaper foreign crews on ferries and other ships working from UK ports, to the extent that UK seafarers held under a quarter of over 67,000 jobs in 2019.”

All the flag waving accompanying the union’s “Save our Seafarers” campaign down through the years has not defended a single job of a “UK seafarer”. Instead, the divisive nationalist campaign has facilitated the super-exploitation of overseas crew. The petition outlined the draconian working conditions these workers confront, including “wages well below the National Living Wage of £8.72 per hour and on contracts that demand 12 hour days, 7 days a week for 6 months.”

“Save Our Seafarers 2020” was the RMT’s means of ingratiating itself further with the government during the pandemic. The union took the vulnerability of global supply chains and the resurgence of the class struggle as a

cue to step up calls for a partnership to secure critical freight routes in the national interest. Discussions were held on new legislation to set a common poverty-level wage for domestic and overseas workers.

In October 2020, the RMT lauded a proposed government amendment to legislation on the National Minimum Wage (NMW) to extend its remit over a range of maritime operations in UK territorial waters. The union claimed in an October 1 press release, “A number of ferry, offshore supply chain and coastal trade routes between UK ports are crewed with seafarers recruited and domiciled outside the UK on contracts for basic rates of pay well below the RMT collectively bargained rate and the NMW. Paying crew below the NMW on these routes will be illegal from 1 October 2020.”

This followed roundtable talks between the RMT, ministers and officials from the Departments of Business and Transport in September 2020. The RMT stated that all that was necessary was to await subsequent guidance from the government about how the new arrangement would be enforced.

Had the government followed through, the RMT would have succeeded in setting the pitifully low minimum wage (£9.50 from April 1, 2022) as the benchmark for British seafarers to be lined up in an internecine conflict over jobs with overseas crews. As the union stated, “UK seafarers are now in a better position to compete for these jobs and RMT will be demanding full recognition for all Ratings on all merchant ships working on these routes.”

Even this turned out to be hot air. The amended legislation on the NMW included major loopholes, including that it did not apply for ferry services between the UK and continental Europe and Ireland, which P&O Ferries mercilessly exploited by replacing 800 employees with agency staff hired on slave wages.

After falsely claiming victory two years ago, the RMT is cynically using the plight of the sacked P&O workers to push for the implementation of its mercenary agreement with the government to act as a gangmaster of cheap labour. A March 21 press statement reads, “RMT has called on Boris Johnson to meet a delegation of sacked P&O workers as it emerged the government have delayed taking action on legislation that would have protected workers for over two years.

“The Union has pointed to commitments made in 2020 in a parliamentary debate by [Tory hereditary peer] Minister Viscount Younger of Leckie on the need to introduce legislation to stop shipping companies paying below the minimum wage.”

The RMT’s response to the brutal actions of P&O Ferries has been toxic nationalism and political deceit. The trade unions are joint architects of the race to the bottom conducted by the shipping and ferry companies owned by transnational corporations such as DP World.

Its disastrous consequences were underscored by the appearance of P&O CEO Peter Hebblethwaite (base pay, £325,000) before parliament’s transport select committee Thursday. He told MPs the replacement staff were being paid an average of £5.50 an hour, with lowest on £5.15, meaning the company had been able to halve its labour costs overnight.

This is only the beginning. According to the rates set by the International Transport Workers' Federation (which claims 677 member organisations in 149 countries representing a combined membership of 19.7 million) and the International Labour Organisation, an Ordinary Seaman can legally be paid as little as \$1.99 an hour. Agency staff brought on at £5 to quickly re-crew the ships can be easily brought onto lower wages or replaced in future.

This is why Hebblethwaite, hypocritically criticised by Transport Secretary Grant Shapps, felt confident to declare before MPs, “I’d do it again”. He added, “We weren’t viable before, and I know that if we hadn’t made radical changes the business would have closed”.

Meanwhile, the sacked 800 are being left to their fate. RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch admitted to Thursday’s transport committee that workers had been given until that day to accept the company’s payoff, agree a nondisclosure and forfeit future legal action. The company claimed Wednesday that 575 workers were in severance discussions.

As the WSWS has explained, “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.”



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