RMT's alliance with UK government leads P&O Ferries fight into a dead end

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P&O Ferries has remained belligerent after CEO Peter Hebblethwaite admitted before parliamentary committees last week that the company knowingly broke the law through its mass firing of 800 seafarers without notice.

The ferry workers were replaced with agency staff paid on average £5.50 an hour, slashing wage costs by half overnight.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps had called on the chief executive to resign last Friday, but Hebblethwaite remains at the helm as he dismisses government entreaties to drop the March 31 redundancy deadline. Those refusing to sign a non-disclosure agreement and forfeit taking out legal action against the company by that date have been threatened with a reduced severance package.

Shapps' March 28 letter to P&O only spoke of the company "offering" the 800 workers their jobs back on existing salaries, making clear that nothing would be done to prevent their illegal firing. The company ruled out any such offer, insisting that slashing wages through mass sackings formed only part of its wider objective for increasing productivity by speed ups and slashing its workforce.

P&O stated, "The predicted savings we announced are not solely coming from a reduction in wages, but from removing job duplication and the benefits we will see from increased flexibility."

The criminal character of the affair is further underscored by the inability of P&O Ferries to provide ships that can be safely put to sea. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) has detained two P&O ferries due to the failure to meet safety requirements. Last Friday the MCA held the European Causeway in Larne, Northern Ireland due to lack of crew familiarisation and training and on Monday it prevented the Pride of Kent sailing from the port of Dover after it also failed a safety inspection.

The Johnson government has been able to rely on the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union, Nautilus International and Unite to ensure that no industrial action has been organised in opposition to the summary dismissal of nearly a third of the P&O Ferries workforce through the most brutal methods.

The campaign of the RMT has been based on suppressing class opposition in favour of a jingoistic campaign in conjunction with the Labour Party directed to the Johnson government. The defence of British seafarers has been based on pitting them against foreign crews, citing the British maritime interests. This entirely degraded spectacle was brought into sharp relief by the only solidarity action to have taken place to date when dockers in the port of Rotterdam, Holland refused to load freight on a P&O ferry destined for Hull last Friday.

P&O Ferries in addition to carrying passengers is responsible for around 15 percent all freight cargo in and out of the UK. Merchant shipping is among the most globalised of all sectors of the economy with 80 percent of freight carried by sea. The social force without which this would not function is a working class which has been fully internationalised but there is no suggestion by the RMT of a unified struggle against the shipping companies and their ruthless exploitation.

The toxic combination of nationalism and class collaboration promoted by the RMT paved the way for the outrageous action taken against workers by P&O Ferries. It has left behind a trail of job losses of British seafarers and expanded the super exploitation of foreign crew from the Philippines, India and eastern Europe.

According to the RMT by 2019 the proportion of

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British seafarers employed in shipping and ferries from UK ports had declined to under a quarter of the 67,000 workforce.

An article in the *Guardian* on March 30 by Gwyn Topham titled "P&O Ferries is not the first in UK waters to hire low-cost workers" shows how widely practised this has become, but in the process seeks to provide a cover for the role of the trade unions.

As far back as 2017 inspections of multiple vessels from different shipping companies working out of UK ports by the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) showed that paying below the UK minimum wage was widespread. A telling fact that Topham omits to mention is that the ITF along with the International Labor Organisation (ILO) institutionalised slave wages by recommending a minimum wage of $1.99 per an hour for an eight hour shift for the lowest ships rating in January 2021.

The article refers to Irish Ferries being the "forefathers of P&O axe-wielding" bringing its low-cost crewing model to operating Dover-Calais crossings in early 2021 and cites its actions in 2005 sacking its crew to replace them with foreign agency workers. The actions of Irish Ferries were the subject of a 20-day strike which was ended by the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union agreeing to mass redundancies and foreign crews hired on the minimum wage. The article is based on promoting the unions as unsung heroes in the fight against the race to the bottom, rather than its joint architects with the shipping companies through the national divisions they have sown between workers.

Rather than the RMT undertaking a heroic fight, its collaboration with the government has demobilised the working class and cut across the international struggle necessary to defeat P&O Ferries. In a March 30 press release the RMT was forced to concede that its allies in the Tory government had not lived up to its expectations:

"It is almost two weeks since our members were sacked by P&O's military style attack and a week since the Prime Minister repeatedly said to Parliament that they would be taking legal action to save these jobs but this has not happened – the government have not even decided to test the arguments in court."

The centrepiece of the 9-point plan outlined by Transport Secretary Shapps in Parliament yesterday, packaged in the media as redressing the actions of P&O Ferries, was for Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to check that all UK ferry operators are compliant with a National Minimum Wage (NMW) and for ports to be given the power to block non-compliant vessels. The national minimum wage is set to rise to £9.50 from next month. This means that if enforced P&O Ferries won't be able to pay agency staff its £5.50 an hour average but will get a "level playing field" with its competitors with poverty pay for seafarers.

In relation to fire and rehire, Shapps only referred to a new statutory code regarding failure to consult that courts or Tribunals could reference in levying an additionally 25 percent compensation paid to a dismissed worker. No legal action is to be taken by the government against P&O Ferries CEO for breaking the law. Shapps only urged the Insolvency Courts to consider whether Hebblethwaite should be disqualified as company head.

In relation to the promotion of the minimum wage for all seafarers, the RMT has tried to distance itself from this by citing the fact that in the case of sacked P&O Ferries workers it would mean a 60 percent cut in wages. However, the RMT has been working throughout the pandemic directly with government ministers to institute this benchmark and claimed that a previous amendment extending NMW legislation in October 2020 to limited UK maritime operations, excluding ferries, was the basis to conduct a wider replacement of foreign crews with UK seafarers. It proclaimed, "UK seafarers are now in a better position to compete."

Labour MP for Hull East, Karl Turner, one of many false friends the RMT has championed, has warmly embraced the minimum wage for ferry workers. "It's a major victory and I'm glad that Grant Shapps will finally enact the legislation following his statement in the House of Commons on Wednesday."

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