

UK: Fire-and-rehire threat to hundreds of jobs at Wabtec rail engineering in Doncaster and Birkenhead

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Wabtec, a rail engineering firm, plans 80 job losses at its two UK sites in Doncaster and Birkenhead. All 150 staff are threatened with fire and rehire, where they will be sacked if they don't re-apply for their own jobs on inferior terms and conditions.

Wabtec Rail Ltd has used the pandemic as a pretext for attacks on its workforce it had attempted to implement for years. In July 2020, during the first wave of COVID-19, their rail refurbishment factory announced plans for up to 450 redundancies, following a 45-day consultation period. The remainder of the workforce was to be fired and forced to take new, inferior contracts.

The firm is part of Wabtec Corporation, a major US conglomerate, based in Pittsburgh, that employs 27,000 people in 50 countries and has an annual turnover of £6 billion, supplying components and services to the rail industry. It is listed on the Standard and Poor's 500 index of large companies on the New York Stock Exchange.

The transnational expanded into the UK in 2011, running a rail refurbishment works in Doncaster and another plant in Birkenhead, Merseyside. Doncaster has an industrial heritage spanning generations, with the famous Flying Scotsman and Mallard locomotives being built there in the 1920s and 1930s. The skilled jobs threatened include factory operatives, assembly fitters, engineers, and supervisors.

Negotiations between Wabtec Corporation and the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) have been ongoing since March 2021 over redundancies, "flexible" contracts, and increased exploitation. The company claims the stepped up productivity measures are to create "modern working

practices", motivated by the "challenging economic climate."

There is mounting opposition to these attacks, rolled out in the context of a pandemic that was routinely used by employers as a pretext for the imposition of wholesale attacks on wages and working conditions. Workers in heavy industry and engineering were forced, as "key workers", to continue to labour in unsafe, overcrowded factories while the super-rich increased their wealth.

RMT members at Wabtec voted by a large majority to reject a company offer in March, the second time the new flexible working conditions have been refused. The company's response was to insist on job losses and threaten to fire and rehire the workforce.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch said that Wabtec "has behaved disgracefully", meekly stressing that the union "is open to talks" but "will not rule out an industrial response."

The RMT has engaged in protracted negotiations with a company acting "disgracefully" and even now only warns of possible industrial action. They did not mobilise their members or raise a call for solidarity across the sector, and among other workers facing similar threats. The attack at Wabtec comes amid ongoing strikes and planned action on the railways, with hundreds of conductors engaged in weekend strikes on TransPennine Express trains over pay. The RMT is currently balloting its 40,000 members over national strike action.

The outcome of the union's prolonged talks with Wabtec is the imposition of fire-and-rehire. This is part of an international process of restructuring required by the corporate elite to extract from the working class the

huge sums of bailout money doled out to corporations and financial institutions throughout the pandemic. The trade unions are an integral part of this process.

While the RMT has declared this an official dispute, with the lack of publicity given, and the union's refusal to respond to this reporter's queries, one must assume they are attempting to return to the negotiating table and assist the company in implementing its plans without calling for strike action.

In 2014, rail workers organised in the RMT balloted for the first time in the history of the firm's British operations, achieving a 90 percent vote to strike. The action was called off at the last minute by the union, who work hand-in-glove with management to keep a lid on potential industrial action. The RMT's political allies in the Labour Party made the token gesture of submitting an Early Date Motion in parliament, which was signed by just 11 members of parliament (MPs) and commits the party to nothing.

Wabtec is making similar attacks at Birkenhead, Merseyside, threatening to fire-and-rehire its 130 staff to impose productivity increases. The Unite union has threatened to organise a strike ballot if the company maintains its threats. The company denies that it plans to make mass redundancies.

This dispute is being artificially separated from that at Doncaster by Unite and the RMT. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham stated, "Wabtec's management must understand that Unite has always fought back against 'fire and rehire' and we are fully prepared to do so again here." But the union has previously agreed to productivity increases at the site. Across the UK, it has allowed the imposition of fire and rehire by betraying several recent struggles, such as those at Go North West and Jacobs Douwe Egberts.

In March, P&O ferries carried out the mass sacking of 800 seafarers, represented by the RMT. Although such practices are legal, companies are only able to implement them with the complicity of the union bureaucracy.

The latest fire and rehire was carried out by a firm based in Hull, CDS Energy Services, who sacked 60 workers earlier this month. The company, located at the city's Saltend oil and gas terminal, immediately sought to rehire 30 of the sacked workers.

These issues affect rail workers across the globe. Engineers at the US division of Wabtec struck for nine

days in March 2019, but the struggle was betrayed by the United Electrical union, which agreed wage and benefits cuts with the company, creating a two-tier workforce for new hires. The union also accepted the company's demand for further restrictions on the right to strike. For workers to fight back against the assault launched by the employers, they must take the leadership of the struggle into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file committees.



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