

Unite suspends strike at UK's ExxonMobil refinery, after union rep is victimised and workers refuse to cross picket line

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Unite announced in an April 28 press release that a sub-contractor for ExxonMobil had suspended one of its reps for organising workers not to cross the picket line of fellow workers engaged in strike action at the Fawley oil refinery in Southampton, the largest in the UK.

Around 100 members of Unite have taken part in two 24-hour stoppages since April 8 against ExxonMobil's subcontractors Trant Engineering Limited, Veolia Services and Altrad Services. The workers have rejected a 2.5 percent two year pay offer and have demanded sick pay entitlement in line with those directly employed by ExxonMobil.

The victimised Unite rep works for Altrad Services and was suspended after 50 of his colleagues voted to respect the picket line. The Unite press release counters the claim that this constituted secondary action and the claim that the action by Altrad Services workers not directly involved in the official dispute presented a risk to health and safety at the oil refinery. It explains, "The workers' vote not to cross the picket line was carried with the proviso that safety critical staff would be on site, which was what occurred."

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham adds, "This is an outrageous victimisation of an innocent man. Altrad Services is clearly rattled by the strength of the support across the workforce for this action for fair pay and against corporate greed.

"Fawley's owners are making money hand over fist. They can more than easily pay these workers fairly but instead choose to attempt to bully them into submission. But Altrad Services should be in no doubt that this disgraceful action will be met with Unite's full force. It should be reversed immediately."

Any genuine organisation of workers would have gone on to explain what action was being taken to overturn this victimisation. A mass meeting would be called to take a vote on whether to escalate the action and to include the section of workers whose rep has been targeted. Any further negotiations over the pay award would be suspended with the precondition that the disciplinary action be lifted.

Not so with Unite! Graham has not only failed to take even these elementary steps. A press release using all sorts of hyperbole to describe the response of the union to the company, including "hit back" and "blasts", concludes, "Strikes have currently been suspended to allow for renewed negotiations."

As soon as the dispute at Fawley threatened wider action beyond the isolated and staggered one day stoppages prescribed by the union, Unite cancelled even the remaining one-day stoppage scheduled for May 6. Graham's response to the company being "rattled" is not to press home the advantage but to enter backroom negotiations with management. Unite's membership had no say in any of this.

A significant factor in Unite closing down the dispute at the largest oil refinery in the UK, run by the American oil giant, is its support for the proxy war by the US and its NATO allies against Russia. ExxonMobil has reported a profits bonanza on the back of massive hikes in energy and fuel prices and will look towards a carve-up of the energy resources of Russia.

Unite, along with Unison, was prepared to back unofficial action against unloading Russian oil from tankers in UK ports presenting the economic sanctions as part of a humanitarian effort in defence of Ukraine. This is to conceal the regime change agenda against

Moscow by the major capitalist governments, paid for by the threat of famine among the world's poorest populations and driving poverty in Britain. But support for war requires closing down any struggle against low pay, denial of sick pay and victimisation at home and all opposition to the Conservative government.

As the WSWS explained, the solidarity from other workers at the Fawley refinery on the first day of strike action on April 8 proved the potential for a far wider fight back against ExxonMobil and its sub-contractors. In its last article on the second one day stoppage on April 25, strikers spoke out about their anger over the huge profits of ExxonMobil while workers were demanded to take a pay cut and denied sick pay three years into a pandemic. They expressed the support for a national strike.

Such sentiments are shared by workers in every sector. From the standpoint of developing their collective struggles against the major corporations, workers have derived no advantage from belonging to the largest private sector union in the UK with a membership of 1.3 million and with their hands on the choke points of the economy. The most graphic example is on the buses where Unite blocked national strike action at the largest private operator Stagecoach and is continuing to push through below inflation deals at Arriva UK Bus, another of the "Big 5" companies.

This concerted attempt to rein in workers resistance is becoming ever-more reliant on false accounting over the pay settlements, routinely cited as stellar victories for the union. The most recent example of this is the ending of the 21-week strike by around 80 workers at CHEP in Greater Manchester.

It also involves the continued kowtowing of the union bureaucracy to its political allies in the Labour Party, even in the face of a major strike breaking operation by Coventry Labour council against 90 refuse drivers and the suspension of a Unite convenor at the depot.

Much has been made of Graham's withdrawal of funding from Labour. But this has been limited to the local party in the council elections and premised on pathetic calls for Labour to do the right thing.

Meanwhile Unite continues to suppress broader strike action at other Labour run councils such as Cardiff in Wales, where it suspended six weeks of continuous strike action voted for by 98 percent of its members at the city's waste services from April 22. Unite had

described a toxic culture of workplace bullying including the "unfair targeting of Unite union reps." But action was suspended for four weeks at the last moment conveniently covering the period of the council elections as Unite entered talks with the local authority.

Unite, like every other trade union, operates today as a corporate syndicate and does not defend its members most basic interests. The highly paid executives command an apparatus dedicated to the suppression of the class struggle and growing left-ward sentiment against the obscene wealth of the corporations.

In its previous article on the dispute at ExxonMobil the WSWS sounded the following warning, "Fawley refinery workers should not accept the limitations imposed on their dispute by Unite, which is isolating the Fawley strikers to prepare the ground for a below-inflation pay deal. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham follows a well-worn script which starts with insincere declarations against 'Filthy Rich' employers and ends with justifications of a sell-out agreement. Last year at Stanlow oil refinery, Unite cancelled a huge mandate for strike action by 400 workers, paving the way for a de facto pay cutting agreement that undermined the pension scheme."

From this it explained, "The way forward is for workers to organise themselves in organisations that they can control and democratically operate, rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union. The contractors at Trant Engineering Limited, Veolia Services and Altrad Services make up around a third of the contractors employed at the Fawley refinery. A rank-and file committee would enable them to reach out to other contractors and those directly employed by Exxon, and to workers at Britain's other six oil refineries, in order to mount a joint offensive."



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