

UK: Cadent engineers' strike mandate suppressed as GMB union offers "gesture of goodwill" to management

Simon Whelan
12 May 2022

Thousands of engineers at major UK gas distributor Cadent began an overtime ban May 10. This limited action took place despite almost 2,000 GMB union members voting overwhelmingly to strike in a ballot over pay in early April.

Based in Coventry, Cadent employs nearly 5,000 workers. In early April, engineers rejected a below-inflation pay increase of 2 percent for 2021 and 4 percent from July this year. When the GMB first announced on March 4 that it would authorise a strike ballot, RPI inflation was already at 7.8 percent. Announcing the ballot result on April 11, it had by then reached 8.2 percent and now stands at 9 percent. RPI is projected to rise to 11 percent by the end of the year.

Cadent engineers are in the obscene situation of working on gas supply infrastructure while fearing to turn on central heating or use cooking facilities in their own homes due to the recent 50 percent increase in gas and electricity prices. Another huge hike will be imposed on households in October.

On the eve of the action, the GMB confirmed it was only asking workers to participate in the limited overtime ban. Gary Carter, GMB National Officer, said the union did so in a spirit of goodwill to a company raking in mass profits as it insists workers suffer with a real-terms pay cut. "Despite members voting overwhelmingly for strike action, as a gesture of goodwill members will begin with a short-term overtime ban," said Carter. He tacked on the idle threat, "But workers will not hesitate to escalate to strike action if the company doesn't come back to the table with an improved pay offer."

The GMB leadership can make this gesture to the bosses on behalf of a highly exploited workforce

because their dues-based salaries are more akin to those of Cadent management than the union's members. Many Cadent engineers earn around £10 per hour, and are forced to take overtime to achieve anything approaching a living wage.

According to the GMB, Cadent made an operating profit of £901 million in 2021 and CEO Steve Fraser was paid a salary of £1.4 million in 2020/21.

On behalf of the company, Chief People Officer Martin Rimmer said the firm was disappointed about the ban but confirmed that there would be no disruption to gas supplies during the dispute.

Cadent Gas is the largest of Britain's four gas distribution network companies, supplying 11 million homes and businesses. It maintains the gas network throughout the East and West Midlands, the North West, East Anglia and North London. Natural gas enters the National Grid transmission system before entering one of eight distribution networks. These networks are owned and operated by Cadent, Scotia Gas Networks Ltd, Wales and West Utilities Limited and Northern Gas Networks Ltd, who supply around half of UK customers.

The UK gas industry was sold off in 1986 as part of a broad programme of free market, laissez-faire inspired privatisation and deregulation carried out by the Thatcher led Conservative government. Cadent is 61 percent owned by a global consortium including Allianz Capital and the Qatar Investment Authority, with 39 percent owned by the UK gas and electricity utility National Grid plc. National Grid had held a majority stake but sold it in 2013 to the above corporations in a deal valuing Cadent at £13.8 billion.

Had the GMB called a stoppage, the Cadent engineers

were in a powerful position to win their demands given their critical role within the gas sector and whole economy. Cadent Gas was founded in 2016 following the sale of the National Grid and is responsible for 82,000 miles of gas pipework and for delivering an emergency gas leak service for all providers.

But the last thing the corporatist GMB bureaucracy wants is to mobilise the collective strength of Cadent's workforce, let alone its members in the other gas network companies. They are instead making pathetic appeals to management to offer staff a proper wage increase, with Carter moralising "They're just not listening to their employees and the problems facing working people—it's plain greed."

Cadent, like any corporation, is deaf to such appeals and is not taken in by the GMB's empty bluster threatening strike action. They know the union has spent months working to avoid a stoppage, engaging in negotiations for weeks since the workforce voted in early April to strike.

After the ballot result was announced April 11, the union had claimed, "Nearly 2,000 GMB members will now walk out as early as 22 April." It added, "GMB will now meet with members to confirm strike dates." This hot air was aimed solely at placating the workforce, with the GMB shelving its mandate and keeping its members in the dark as the union bureaucracy sought to cobble together a settlement to the satisfaction of management.

Carter stressed in the union's press release, "This strike can still be averted—Cadent just needs to treat workers right and help them through this crisis." The company, however, refused to offer the GMB anything they could reasonably sell to the workforce. Without anything to show for their compliance, the union are still holding out an olive branch to management by limiting action to an overtime ban.

Cadent workers must beware: the GMB will move to a sellout deal at the first opportunity. Only last summer the union formally ended its dispute with British Gas, which had a set a date to "fire and rehire" its workforce. This was after British Gas engineers had taken 42 days of action in a determined fight to oppose mass sackings and an evisceration of working conditions. The GMB claimed that it had won a "new, improved pay deal." The reality was that almost 500 workers were sacked, and the remaining engineers

forced to accept inferior terms and conditions.

At no stage during the dispute did the GMB call on other workers in the British Gas group, or the nearly 700,000-strong workforce in the UK energy sector, to back the strike. None of the union's wider 620,000-strong membership were ever mobilised.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote of the unions after the British Gas betrayal, "Where they are unable to prevent strikes from taking place, their role is to isolate every manifestation of opposition, wear down the resistance, and then impose the dictates of the corporations. The British Gas dispute confirms that the unions respond to pressure from below not by waging a struggle for the working class, but by integrating themselves closer still into the structures of management and the state apparatus to better suppress their members."

To avoid a similar fate, the Socialist Equality Party calls on Cadent engineers to establish rank-and-file committees independent of the GMB. Cadent workers should establish contact with other gas engineers and utility workers across the UK and take the fight for a living wage and the best terms and conditions out of the hands of the union bureaucracy.

Their struggle must be connected with the fight for the nationalisation of the gas industry under workers' control. All utility companies should be placed under public ownership and their profits seized to improve workers' pay and conditions, make gas supplies affordable for workers and small businesses, and allow the necessary huge investment in infrastructure.

We urge Cadent workers to get in touch today to discuss the way forward in the fight against the company and its partners in the trade union bureaucracy.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact