

UK workers on North Sea oil and gas rigs stage unofficial strike action in “wage revolution”

Tony Robson
20 May 2022

Workers on oil and gas rigs in the North Sea staged unofficial strike action over low pay on Wednesday, the day that inflation hit a 40 year high in Britain, reaching 9 percent CPI and 11.1 percent RPI.

Energy Voice, a specialist news group on the energy sector, reported, “Workers on installations for some of the sector’s largest operators, including BP’s ETAP and Harbour Energy’s Judy, downed tools in an effort to force an increase to pay, in what has been described by some as a ‘wage revolution’.”

The workers involved in the wildcat are employed by Bilfinger UK and Wood, subcontractors for the major energy companies that operate the offshore platforms.

The action was started by fabric maintenance workers on the TotalEnergies-operated Elgin platform and Safe Caledonia flotel Tuesday evening, but rapidly spread to include the ETAP and the Clair field platforms operated by BP. By Thursday, 16 installations were impacted by the action including Glen Lyon FPSO, the Foinaven FPSO, Taqa Tern Alpha and Cormorant Alpha, Dana Petroleum’s Triton FPSO.

The wildcat strikes have been subject to a virtual media blackout at a time when profit gouging by oil and gas companies is sending household energy bills spiralling, adding to the disastrous cost-of-living crisis for millions.

The action by offshore workers coincided with a walkout at the Ineos petrochemical refinery at Saltend in Hull, northeast England. Construction workers downed tools Tuesday after two days of stoppages last week by 300 employees of sub-contractor Altrad Services. This is part of an on-going dispute over unpaid and underpaid wages. The Ineos Group is owned by the 27th richest man in the UK, Sir James Ratcliffe, worth over £6 billion.

Workers engaged in the unofficial action are demanding a £7 rise in the hourly base rate. *Teeside Live* cited

messages circulated to workers by one of the organisers stating, “The wage revolution has started - we are not singling out one company but industry world-wide as a whole. The cost of living has gone up dramatically and wages on the other hand have gone down - or stalled - dramatically.” Wages, the worker continued, had stagnated from 2016 with oil now worth \$100 plus per barrel. “Most in the industry are on zero-hour contracts, they can send you on your way at any moment.”

Teeside Live quoted a local North Sea worker who said around a thousand were involved in the action. “They have cut off WiFi so the lads can’t even speak to their families, their loved ones, they have cut off their pay, they need our help and our voice for this to be resolved ASAP.”

The trade unions cited in the *Energy Voice* coverage have not produced a press release of their own appealing for any support for the action of the offshore workers. Both the GMB and Unite were quoted as complete bystanders to events. While the GMB and Unite made cursory references to low pay and profits, this was framed within the context of how the employers could have spared themselves industrial action.

GMB Scotland organiser Dom Pritchard said, “GMB has previously warned the industry that it needs to drag itself into the future, so it can retain and recruit the people who will deliver the oil and gas we need on the journey to net zero and beyond.”

A Unite spokesperson said the union had been unaware of the concerns and demands of the workers and strikes could have been prevented if Bilfinger UK, one of the main sub-contractors hit by the stoppages, had signed up to the Energy Services Agreement (ESA). “However, Unite has been clear that employers who repeatedly refused to pay wages which reflect the cost of living with

inflation soaring at 11.1% can only stoke resentment amongst workers.”

The ESA is a framework agreement on minimum pay and conditions covering 5,000 offshore workers based on the collaboration of three unions (GMB, Unite and the RMT) and fourteen employers. Its stated purpose is securing “stability and certainty on a substantive cost element for the industry and investors” and to support the “sustainability of the supply chain.”

What Unite describes as “resentment” is decisive action taken by workers collectively to reverse the collapse of their living standards. Its first response to the dispute has been to try and end it. The union called on rig workers to halt their industrial action Thursday on the pretext that Bilfinger UK had agreed to sign up to the ESA. A Unite spokesperson stated, “Bilfinger UK and Unite are now requesting all workers return to normal working practices on the basis both parties will enter into talks through the ESA framework to discuss issues of mutual concern which has led to the current industrial unrest of the workforce.”

Bilfinger UK has now stated that it is prepared to issue dismissal notices against workers continuing unofficial action.

Unite places its pressure not on the employers, but on rig workers to abandon their action. This is the actual role of Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham, counter to the claim that she has spearheaded a revival of workplace activism and a wave of pay victories. Last November Unite agreed a sellout deal at the second largest refinery in the UK at Stanlow in Ellesmere Port, northwest England operated by Essar Oil UK. The pay deal followed the cancellation of strike action by 400 workers and the agreed 6.2 percent for this year is already close to falling below half the rate of inflation.

Last month Unite suspended selective strike action at the largest oil refinery in the UK at Fawley, Southampton operated by US giant ExxonMobil. Since the start of April around 100 members of Unite had taken part in two 24-hour stoppages against ExxonMobil’s subcontractors Trant Engineering Limited, Veolia Services and Altrad Services. They had rejected a pitiful two-year pay offer of 2.5 percent and demanded sick pay entitlement denied to them during a global pandemic.

The union cancelled the third day of scheduled action in response to the suspension of a Unite rep employed by Altrad Services, after 50 workers at the company on the Fawley site respected the picket line of their fellow workers. Graham described this as “an outrageous

victimisation of an innocent man” but then suspended the last day of scheduled action to enter back room talks with management.

The essentially corporatist agenda of the Unite bureaucracy that Graham has tried to revamp is being tested by an outbreak of genuine working-class activism. The cost-of-living crisis is fuelling a new stage of the class struggle that is beginning to assume an insurgent character in relation to the trade unions. This is already being seen in the resistance of London bus workers at Arriva South against Unite’s attempt to ram through a below-inflation pay deal after suspending strike action this week.

For workers wanting to take the fight to the employers, sectional divisions are recognised as a block on them deploying their collective strength against a corporate oligarchy responsible for brutal austerity. Its criminal disregard for the social hardship suffered by millions is only matched by the reckless drive to extend the proxy war by NATO against Russia in Ukraine into a global conflict.

It is no accident that the predatory war abroad and the class war at home should manifest itself so clearly in the fight of workers in the energy sector. The same oil and gas companies exploiting the destabilisation of the world are throwing households into poverty while the workers they depend on are denied a living wage.

Workers need to establish a network of rank-and-file committees, genuine democratic organisations that break down the sectional and national divisions upheld by the corporatist trade unions. This will enable workers to unify their struggles against their common enemy.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)