

North Sea oil and gas rig workers end wildcat strike as Unite lines up with employers

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25 May 2022

Wildcat action across 16 platforms in the North Sea last week has been ended, according to the two main contractors operating the rigs for the oil and gas companies.

The company Wood stated that its workers had ended the unofficial action Friday evening. Bilfinger UK, which bore the brunt of the stoppages, reported that all workers had returned to their posts by Saturday evening. According to one of the organisers, thousands of workers participated in the stoppages.

The action started on Tuesday night and spread rapidly. It developed entirely outside of the trade unions, Unite, the GMB and the RMT, which are part of a collective agreement with fourteen contractors through the Energy Services Agreement (ESA). The ESA sets minimum standards of pay and conditions for 5,000 offshore workers. Its priorities are ensuring stability and certainty “for industry and investors” and the “sustainability of supply lines.”

The strikers had demanded a “wage revolution.” Crucially, the message circulated by its organisers stated that the action was not directed at one company but the “industry world-wide as a whole.”

Wage negotiations in recent years have been characterised by the absence of any pay demand by the trade unions. In contrast, those involved in the walkouts drew up a concrete demand for a £7 increase in the base hourly rate of pay. They explained that wages had declined or stagnated while prices have soared.

Pointing to the profits extracted by the energy giants and contractors from their labour, the strikers referenced the current price of a barrel of oil which had risen to \$100 plus. Among the installations hit by the action were the ETAP and Clair Field oil platforms operated by BP, which has reported expected profits of £15.5 billion this year.

What was the response of the officially recognised unions to this decisive intervention by workers to reverse the collapse of their living standards?

Unite, the GMB and the RMT didn’t even issue a press release to draw attention to this important struggle or call for solidarity, helping to enforce the media blackout of the strike action.

In the case of Unite and the GMB, the media quotes they provided were framed entirely from the standpoint of how the industrial action could have been prevented, using the language of management with references to “labour unrest” and “resentment” to describe the spontaneous walkout.

After admitting ignorance of workers’ longstanding grievances, Unite stepped in to call a halt to the wildcat strike. It cited Bilfinger UK’s agreeing to become a signatory to the ESA as a pretext to call for a return to work issued jointly with the company.

Bilfinger UK then immediately threatened to issue notifications of dismissal unless workers provided an undertaking by Friday afternoon to return to work. After issuing its ultimatum the company turned reality on its head, stating that it was investigating threats and intimidation—supposedly *by* workers against those who refused to continue the unofficial action. “Any employee who is found to have made such threats will be subject to disciplinary action up to and including summary dismissal,” it warned.

Unite’s call for the rig workers to place their faith in the ESA has not appeased the strikers. *Energy Voice* reports that it has seen three core demands drawn up by workforce representatives on the Clair, Clair Ridge, ETAP and Glen Lyon platforms, which have been presented to Bilfinger UK. They state that the £7 base rate demand is negotiable but “token gestures of £1 an hour etc” are unacceptable. Included in the demands is

a refusal to participate in the ESA and that all those involved in the unofficial action be paid. Bilfinger UK stated it would respond by today (Wednesday).

The dispute has been ended for now through a combination of management intimidation and the direct collusion of Unite and the other unions with the companies in enforcing workers' isolation. None of the essential demands of the workers who staged the action have been met.

For the rig workers to move forward, an appeal must be made by those who launched the wildcat action to the 5,000 offshore workers covered by Unite, GMB and the RMT. Their isolation of the strike is part and parcel of the unions' policing of workers through the corporatist set-up of the ESA.

The decisive action taken on North Sea rigs to demand a redistribution of the wealth of the corporations to protect the living standards of those who produce the profits is a powerful expression of a sentiment shared far beyond the offshore energy industry. It is setting workers, striving for unity and the mobilisation of their social strength against the corporate and financial elite, on a collision course with the trade unions.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham has not had a word to say publicly over the unofficial strike wave on the rigs as the union acted to shut it down. The cultivated image in the media of her overseeing a rebirth of trade unionism and riding a wave of pay victories is meant to conceal the real role she has performed as chief industrial firefighter on behalf of the Johnson government and employers in preventing a strike wave.

In April Graham stated in relation to wage increases, "Where employers can pay, they should." This provides the pretext for the corporations to plead poverty, with Unite defending "narrow profit margins" on their behalf. This is what Unite has done to push a below-inflation deal on bus drivers to end their strike action against Arriva London South in the teeth of significant opposition.

Unite has worked mightily to suppress of workers' struggles for a wage increase across the highly profitable energy sector. Last November it cancelled strike action by 400 workers to push through a below-inflation deal for this year of 6.2 percent at the second largest oil refinery in the UK at Stanlow, operated by

Essar Oil UK. At the largest oil refinery in the country at Fawley, the union suspended strike action by 100 workers against three of the contractors for ExxonMobil, which owns the site. The refinery workers have rejected a 2.5 percent pay offer for two years and are demanding sick pay entitlement.

Unite halted the official action which began at the start of April at the end of the month, after one of its own reps was suspended along with his fellow workers at the refinery for refusing to cross the picket line. It went into backroom negotiations rather than risk an extension of the dispute in opposition to the victimisation. It has now announced a further series of selective strikes from June 9, but has not reported on whether the disciplinary action has been lifted.

The union has not tabled a pay demand even as it waxes indignant against "filthy rich" ExxonMobil. The US oil giant posted a fourth-quarter profit of \$8.87 billion (£6.3 billion) in February, boosted by the doubling of natural gas prices since 2020 and an 80 percent increase in oil prices.

The unofficial action on the North Sea rigs must become the basis for the formation of a network of rank-and-file committees: genuine organisations of struggle which break down the sectional barriers between offshore and onshore workers, contractors and those directly employed by the energy corporations. They can reach out to oil workers across the globe, including the 500 Chevron workers in the US who have spent two months on the picket line and whose strike pay has been cut off by the United Steelworkers Union.

The collective power of this key section of workers can be harnessed to wage a defence of their living standards through an assault on the obscene profits and wealth of the oil and gas corporations.



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