

UK: Rail maintenance workers in Doncaster take strike action against fire and rehire by Wabtec

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Rail maintenance workers employed by Wabtec Faiveley UK took four days of strike action at the end of last week at its Doncaster depot, opposing the imposition of inferior terms through fire and rehire.

Workers are threatened with longer hours with fewer breaks and no commensurate pay increase. They struck between June 10 and 13, with another strike set from June 27 through to July 3.

The strike involves around 200 engineers who are members of Unite the union and the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union (RMT). The former has a membership of around 150 and the latter 60 at the Doncaster site, comprising the bulk of the workforce.

The strikes are underway against a background in which both unions have stalled a mobilisation against the real-terms wage cut and increased exploitation. Wabtec's new contracts include a below-inflation pay deal.

In March, RMT and Unite members voted by a significant majority against company demands for restructuring terms and conditions. Wabtec responded by insisting on job losses and threatening to sack and rehire the workforce on the new contracts, in the knowledge that few other skilled jobs are available. This was the second time workers have rejected the company's proposals, following a vote to reject the plans at the end of last year.

Management has in the meantime been allowed by the unions to undermine collective bargaining agreements covering both. They have pressurised workers in one-to-one meetings—optionally attended by union representatives—to persuade them to sign the inferior contracts.

Wabtec were given a free hand while Unite and the

RMT sat on opposition. Strike action occurred only after the company boasted about how far down the road it was with its agenda. A spokesman for the company stated, “We have spoken to employees directly, which has resulted in more than 70 percent of the workforce voluntarily agreeing to the new working practices and the pay increase.”

The turnout on picket lines last week served as an indictment of both unions' role in handing the initiative entirely to the company. Among those involved in the stoppages were workers who had signed the contract under duress.

The RMT ballot for strike action in May returned a majority in favour but the high abstention rate revealed the lack of confidence in the union's waging any fight. Only 35 of the 60 eligible members participated in the strike ballot, with 25 voting in favour of industrial action. This speaks volumes about the record of the RMT in tying workers to negotiations with the company and divorcing the fight at Wabtec from the broader assault on rail workers, with national rail strikes set to take place from next week involving over 40,000 RMT members.

RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch said, “Wabtec has behaved appallingly from start to finish and wants our members to pay for the company's financial problems by firing staff and rehiring them on inferior wages and conditions.

“Wabtec bosses should be ashamed of tarnishing Doncaster's proud history of manufacturing, with predecessors building the Flying Scotsman and Mallard locomotives.”

But the RMT has engaged in protracted negotiations with a company acting “disgracefully,” only now being

forced to call staggered strike action as they seek a working arrangement with Wabtec they can pass off to the workforce.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham said of the dispute, “Shame on Wabtec. This company is the latest in the line of bad bosses seeking to use the abhorrent practice of ‘fire and rehire’ to attack workers and cut pay.”

“Wabtec is trying to bully staff to sign up for markedly inferior wages and conditions. There is no way Unite will ever agree to that.”

Such rhetoric cannot disguise the unions’ decades of collaboration with big business that have created the conditions where bosses are free to implement these attacks largely unopposed. Across the UK, corporatist collusion between the unions and management has allowed the imposition of fire and rehire by preventing or betraying major struggles such as at British Airways, Centrica (British Gas), P&O Ferries, Go North West and Jacobs Douwe Egberts.

Companies in Britain have had the legal right to fire and rehire for years, terminating existing employment contracts and leaving workers with the decision of either accepting the “new” role with worse pay and conditions or desperately seeking a new job. Employers have ruthlessly used the context of the pandemic to escalate these policies. This is part of an international wave of restructuring required by the financial oligarchy to extract from the working class the huge sums of bailout money doled out to corporations and financial institutions. The trade unions are an integral part of this process.

Neither Unite nor the RMT is prepared to challenge the company’s prerogative to restructure in pursuit of increased competitiveness. A Wabtec spokesperson said the company has “shared sobering facts” with unions and has proposed “a pathway to preserve work at the plant.” The company claims the stepped-up productivity measures will create “modern working practices”, motivated by the “challenging economic climate.”

Wabtec has already reduced its UK workforce by hundreds and eliminated overtime hours to cut costs. It used the pandemic as an opportunity to gut its staff and alter contracts. In July 2020, their rail refurbishment factory announced hundreds of redundancies. Throughout the pandemic, engineering staff, as “key

workers”, were pressured to keep labouring in unsafe factories to keep profits flowing.

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 against attacks on pay and conditions. The union cancelled the action at the last minute, following talks with company management.

The firm is part of Wabtec Corporation, a US conglomerate employing 27,000 people in 50 countries with an annual turnover of £6 billion, supplying components and services to the rail industry. The US-based conglomerate set up shop in Doncaster and Birkenhead in 2011. It provides parts for rail operators across Europe, mainly in the UK and Germany, such as Freightliner KFA, Angel Trains, and Siemens.

The giant corporation operates across national borders to reap the profits from a global workforce which is interconnected through international production and supply chains. Its race to the bottom in terms of pay and conditions is entirely dependent on the national divisions upheld by the trade unions.

As demonstrated by Lynch’s comment that Wabtec is bringing shame to the home of the Flying Scotsman train, the RMT and Unite are pursuing a PR campaign based on moral appeals to national identity, rather than fighting for the international unity of Doncaster rail workers with the company’s global workforce.

In the US, the counterpart of Unite and the RMT, the United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers union, betrayed a nine-day strike at Wabtec’s American division in March 2019, agreeing wage cuts, reduced terms, and strike restrictions with the company and creating a two-tier workforce for new hires.

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 operating independently of the trade union apparatus.



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