

# BT workers speak from the picket lines in first UK-wide strike in 35 years

Our reporters  
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BT Group was hit Friday by a walkout of 40,000 call centre staff and engineers taking part in the first day of their 48-hour national strike action which will continue next Monday.

This is the first company-wide strike action in 35 years. The members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) returned resounding mandates on June 30 at BT and its subsidiary, Openreach. Telecoms workers are fighting to overturn a below inflation deal imposed back in April of between 3 and 8 percent, while RPI inflation climbed to 11.9 percent.

According to the CWU, there were hundreds of picket lines. These were well attended across the country with postal workers joining the BT picket line in Kettering, boosting the numbers to over 50. This is an expression of the widespread sentiment for joint action, given Royal Mail has followed in the footsteps of BT in imposing an even lower pay deal of 2 percent for this year.

BT chief executive Philip Jansen dismissed any notion that the company would reopen talks with the CWU, insisting the de facto pay cut was final. He told the *Financial Times*, “It’s history. It’s done.”

Jansen added that the company had prepared strikebreaking measures in advance by reducing workloads and ensuring 25,000 contractors were prepared to strikebreak. The day before the strike action BT reported quarterly after-tax profits to June of £422 million (up from £388 million) on top of the £1.3 billion from last year.

*World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke to striking telecoms workers on picket lines around the country. A selection of interviews is published below, with more to follow.

In **Sheffield** at the Openreach depot and BT data centre Parkway Close, a mobile engineer explained,

“You’ve seen the cost of living. I’ve got a wife and two kids to support. We are going to struggle. And then you get the way they come out with the profits. It’s a slap in the face.

“With winter coming and you see fuel bills going up, I just don’t know. You go to Asda and you come away with just a bagful sometimes and you’ve spent 70 quid [pounds] and it’s like, how can this continue?”

His colleague added, “You’ve got to stand up for yourself, like we are doing today. You can’t let everybody walk all over you, every time. I think it’s just the start of everything, there is the rail [strikes] and Royal Mail. It’s not going to stop at us, it’s going to be somebody else next.”

On the other picket line in the city at Eldon House offices and depot, Matt, CWU assistant branch secretary South Yorkshire, said, “The pay award has not been agreed it has been imposed. We have not had a decent pay increase for three years. Two years ago, it was 1.5 percent, last year a pay freeze with a lump sum and now a below inflation award this year.

“The 8 percent figure cited by BT is totally misleading. This applies to call centre workers at EE [a BT subsidiary] but it was not given in one go. It includes an earlier increase the company introduced to bring these workers up to the rate of other call centres workers nationally, such as TalkTalk. There was a major problem with turnover because the pay was so low.

“BT has announced even more profits for this first quarter alone on top of the £1.3 billion last year. There is going to be a summer of discontent because these wealthy CEOs cannot just keep taking more money from the profits we produce. We worked through the pandemic putting our lives at risk entering people’s homes.

“You can see with the rail strike the Tories are behind all of this. Things are building towards a general strike. We need to all stand together in solidarity to have the maximum impact—enough is enough.”

Outside BT’s Dial House offices in **Salford**, CWU rep Ian Tomlinson explained, “This is a strike about fair pay, the company was recently taken over by a new set of managers, whose aim and policy is to lower terms and conditions, control costs because they have to ramp up the share price, and the international speculators have appointed a new CEO called Phillip Janson. He was CEO for Worldpay, he made £55 million to leave Worldpay and join BT. He’s just awarded himself a 32 percent pay award, to put his pay to £3.4 million a year, which is 85 times the average pay of my members.

“When we went to see him after the pandemic, about a pay award for our members, he said, ‘No, you’ll have an imposed one.’

“We asked him why. Our members maintained all the UK digital infrastructure to keep the whole of the UK economy—all the blue light emergency services, police, fire, ambulance, the NHS, Ministry of Defence, the government, the whole of everything—keep them working. We turned out 24/7 all the way through the pandemic, putting their own lives at risk, and then they get stuffed with an arbitrary, enforced pay award, which when it was given to us on April 1 this year, inflation has now stripped it out to make it worthless. Yet the chief executive gave £760 million pounds to the shareholders for this year alone.”

In relation to the pledge by Conservative Party leadership contender Liz Truss to outlaw strikes completely in essential services, he added, “If you ban that type of activity, what you are saying is that we want to get to a political state where there cannot be any dissent. That is like how you get to the rogue elements that you see around the world, where you must start invading another sovereign country to make your point about how you see things for the future. Which I think is disgraceful.”

At BT’s Dewsbury Road site in **Leeds** where 300 engineers are employed, pickets said the strike was solid. They are part of the workforce on the rollout of new fibre connections. Union rep Dan said, “We install the new fibre network, so if it wasn’t for us, people wouldn’t have been able to use the Internet as well

during the lockdown. We have been putting our families at risk during the pandemic to install the new gear. Now that’s just getting rubbed in our face. The £1,500 BT paid us will just go to cover the increases in gas and electric. Everything is going up, except for our wages.”

Alan said, “We’ve not been on strike since 1987, so it’s significant that we are taking this action now. We know the strike is solid here. No one has tried to come in. We’re all seeing the effect of downsizing. Departments get closed down and then people get work piled onto them.

Richard said, “If we don’t get a 10 percent rise—I’d like more than 10 percent—people aren’t going to be able to pay their [utility] bills. Mine’s £200 a month now and it’s going up to around £330. I could probably afford that, but for how long? It goes up again in January and could be up to around £400, that’s almost as much as my mortgage. My mortgage term ends in about 18 months, so if this all doesn’t get sorted out, I could be paying far more than now.

“I don’t know much about who is standing as the new leader of the Tory Party. But politically, it doesn’t really matter who’s in power. I think it is silver spoon-fed people and they’re all paid by the same people. I don’t think it would be much different if Labour were in power... People go out and vote, but no matter which one gets in, it’s just the same.”



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