

Striking UK telecoms workers speak from the pickets

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Our reporters
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Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with some of the 40,000 striking BT workers at pickets across the country Friday. This is the second set of interviews given—the first can be read here.

At the Sovereign Streetpicket line in **Leeds**, many drivers were beeping their horns in solidarity as they drove past.

Paul and Danny work for Openreach in network alterations and highways alterations, removing poles and cables, working with a wide range of customers, councils, highways, architects and developers.

Paul said, “We’re on strike because of the imposition of the pay award that has not been agreed, it’s just been thrown at us. The management refuse to keep on consulting. We’ve just had enough of it. We had no pay rise last year, although we all worked through the pandemic as key workers.

When you split our pay rise down—and we’re on one of the higher team member pay rates—the £1,500 flat rate payments, it’s just the equivalent of a 1.67 percent pay rise over the two years. It wasn’t a pay rise really, it was a pay cut.

“We’ve seen with the degradation of terms and conditions and with new staff coming into the company, they are chipping away at their pay levels. What they pay them is going down significantly. It can be anywhere up to £10,000 less.

“The cost of everything has gone up, gas and electric, we’ve got kids, and even us on slightly higher pay rates are struggling to pay bills. We wonder how people on the lower pay grades manage. I am paying £200 a month when it was only £70 before for electricity, and

it will be up to £500 when the cap comes off. The insinuation that workers asking for a fair pay deal is causing inflation is bogus.”

Productivity has shot up, said Paul, “It’s less people doing more, our work rates have gone through the roof. We have colleagues leaving because of the conditions. I’ve worked 20 years for BT and I’ve never seen the number of people leave this company like now.

“We have had a battle to retain our terms and conditions, but this with pay takes the biscuit. We have to take a stand now; we can’t accept that management just impose a pay deal and don’t talk to the union about it.”

“There’s a belief among the workers here that if we don’t fight now, where is it going to end? It could end in a fire and rehire situation.

“I agree with what RMT leader Mick Lynch said about it coming to a general strike if the Tories introduce all this anti-strike legislation. We watched the Tory leadership debate in Leeds last night. Neither of the candidates offer anything in terms of workers’ rights.

“BT did alright during the pandemic, they didn’t furlough anyone. We were badged up as key workers. Everyone wanted good broadband if they were working at home. We had to work with very little PPE. Our people put their lives on the lines to carry on working. And we got no pay rise at all last year and this pittance this year.”

Speaking about the ban on picket line visits imposed by Labour party leader Sir Keir Starmer on shadow cabinet ministers, Paul said, “When we went out on

strike last year, we had a lot of support from Labour MPs locally and even shadow ministers. Even Jeremy Corbyn got involved, going down to the BT Tower in London. Now, you've got Starmer saying no one from the front bench can go on a picket line. What's happening there? I don't know which party represents the working class in this country now."

Danny said of the pay award, "It's a drop in pay. I've got less money in my pocket than I had this time last year. CEO Philip Jansen, has given himself a 32 percent pay rise and then says there's no money in the pot to pay the key workers that got us through the pandemic. It's just outrageous, and they give the shareholders £750 million in dividends! It's not fair at all.

"If we don't fight for a proper pay rise, next year it will just be the same. They'll just impose whatever pay rise they want and say that's it. We need to fight for it, or it will be worse and worse in years to come. You should have all the workers out together."

At the Alexander Bain House picket line in York Street, **Glasgow**, BT engineer Martin said that in addition to the well-attended picket, workers were holding virtual pickets for staff who are still working from home.

Jack said that what was happening to BT staff was happening to workers across Britain while people at the top of businesses were "stealing it all".

"None of the workers are getting any of the money they make. People out here should be getting the money and they are not." The problem was "capitalism while workers are suffering from COVID." Jack said he agreed with the Socialist Equality Party's demand for a general strike.

Another Glasgow picket said, "I am also branch secretary, I am a consumer worker which means I would take calls from customers.

"Everyone is aware of the cost-of-living crisis as it is everywhere at the moment and it's something that people are confronting every day. I think given the nature of the work that everyone at BT does, it is a particularly skilled job that we do. The fact that we're not getting paid enough means that we are having to open a food bank here and I know that workers are having to use it. We have a food bank in the building, which is utterly embarrassing. They've tried to dispel it saying it's a 'community pantry', but say as it is, it's a

foodbank within a BT company building. It is utterly embarrassing.

"People are now realising, that enough is enough and there is no turning back. The tide is turning, the hashtag is there for all to see, #summerofsolidarity. Every working person must realise now, and has I think, that it's time to stand up and fight for what you deserve."

He had seen the comments from RMT leader Lynch that the government could provoke a general strike. The picket said, "If they want to call an all-out general strike then I think that is something that has to be taken seriously by every worker. We've just let things get so bad in the UK now. I would say that this is the general feel of people here, you can no longer be despondent and ignore what's going on in the world around you. I think people would be more than happy to join those beside them—neighbours, friends, family—to make sure that they are not put in that position as much as they possibly can. The workers run the country, of course they do—they are the people that keep everything going. Every business is kept afloat by the workers."



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