

BT Group workers speak out during second UK-wide strike day:

“The government want this confrontation; look at the way they are treating others too.”

Our reporters
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WSWS reporters spoke to BT Group workers on picket lines around the UK during Monday's national strike

On the picket line at **Horsham Exchange** in south east England an engineer said that after initial negotiations between the company and the Communication Workers Union (CWU) “it came to loggerheads and £1,500 turned up in our wages [from BT]. So that was it, no more negotiations, no percentage.

“BT keep on saying it's the biggest pay rise in 20 years, but while it may be a big rise for the newbies who are on a lower wage, it's not much for us who've been in the job longer, it's only about 2 or 3 percent. It doesn't help much considering the gas and electricity bills are rising in October, so that £1,500 disappeared in no time. At the moment it's the people at the lower end of the pay scale who are losing.

“I'm fortunate to have a job but our pay over the years has been eroded. BT have gotten away with it for a while but it's coming to a head now. It's happening across the spectrum. There's just so much greed. We worked throughout the whole pandemic, an engineer's wage is about £32,000 which is a lot more than some people, but not much in this day and age.

“To be honest I think the whole situation is really horrible. I've been climbing telegraph poles for about 35 years, it gets tiring. I'd like to retire at some point but when you retire your bills and taxes don't stop do they?”

Asked his thoughts on the rail strikes that have taken place alongside the BT strikes in the last week he said, “It's always the people at the bottom who suffer. Network Rail are claiming they've made a good deal, but when you listen to the deal there are lots of strings.”

BT engineer Chris said, “A lot of engineers who've

been doing the underground work get wrecked knees and backs after so many years on the job, especially when you get to about 60 and want to retire. But pensions have stopped and started over the years.

“I'm luckier than a lot but not as lucky as some. I've been working here for nearly 35 years, hopefully a few more, but it's obvious that things are changing. My energy bill has doubled since last year and I'm expecting it to go up again, and I've still got a mortgage to pay. It's killing me having two days strike without pay but if we don't do it then I don't know if I'll be able to see out the end of the year. So hopefully we'll win this, and if we don't then we'll be back again.

“It's a pity some of the younger employees aren't here today. Some of them have only been here for a few months, so they're reluctant about striking because they're worried about the sack, so it's understandable if they don't want to join the picket. But as long as they're still on strike it's still supporting the struggle.

“A lot of the younger employees look forward to starting their new careers here like we did, but they're worried. If they're coming into a situation when they're already on strike after only a few months on the job then suddenly a life in telecommunications doesn't seem so appealing. And now [Conservative government Business Secretary] Kwasi Kwarteng wants to change the law to allow temporary workers to take people's places, it's not a pretty picture for new employees.”

A customer service engineer said, “We are out over pay and conditions. They've imposed a pay deal on us. What is next? A hire and rehire like they did with P&O [where 800 workers were fired on the spot]? The government seem to want this confrontation; look at the way they are

treating others too. We have to take a stand now. If not now, when?

Outside **Dial House in Salford**, Greater Manchester, a number of BT engineers spoke about the inferior conditions being imposed by the company on the workforce, starting with new hires.

One explained, “An engineer who’s been here some time will be on £38,000 to £42,000. And now technicians are being brought on at £20,000 and they get a maximum of £27,000. They are not expected to do our type of work straight away but we’re going to train them to do it.”

Another said, “They were dangled a carrot saying if you do all the training and work you can get to what the senior staff are on. But they’ve just been given notification of their new hours. They’ve got splits, including earlies and lates and working Saturdays, and they are not too happy about that. They got told they were doing 37 hours—Monday to Friday, 8am to 4.30pm—at first, so they took the job for the normal hours.

“I don’t think the company cares about engineers anymore. During COVID we went for 18 months with no hot water in the building and that’s when the government was saying everyone had to keep washing their hands for 20 seconds. And then the managers and office staff came back in the building and they ‘suddenly’ found the £26,000 to fix the hot water and get it back on.

“We also never got PPE during COVID, we had to get it ourselves.

“And it’s not just that. In 2020 we never got a pay rise. Last year it was only a £1,000 one-off we got. Then the CEO [Philip Jansen] is getting £2.1 million last year. At the end of this year, he would have picked up £10 million in bonus since he’s been here.”

A CWU rep added that “Jansen was brought in to increase the share price of the company and to lower labour costs”

At the **Rougemont picket line in Exeter** a worker said, “we’re all just numbers to them,” noting that BT had allocated a mere £90 million to its workforce pay award versus handing out £760 million to shareholders, after reaping £1.3 billion in profit.

Another, Nick, who works in business systems (including supplying communications to blue light services like fire, ambulance and police) with 44 years’ experience, said that Jansen’s pay in the last year was more than he had received for his lifetime of work.

The company “made £2 billion in profits before tax. If they were to give each of the staff an extra £5,000 pounds a year pay rise, they would still make over a billion

profit.”

He said that the CWU have “tried to negotiate when the membership have actually been more for taking action. This is the first strike since 1987 because I think that the members have become that much more fed up. Jansen has a history of trying to break strikes.”

He pointed out that putting workers on different sets of terms “isn’t a strategy that the company just thought up overnight. This is in a long-time strategy where they’ve changed gradings within BT. There was a time, historically, there was a fixed grading, and it was for everyone at BT. And now what’s happened is BT have actually taken over other companies, they’ve taken on their pay scales, and they now have numerous different pay scales. And of course, they’re able to get a lot of these people on the lower pay scales now as they join the company.”

Asked what he thought about the union not making a specific pay demand, when workers had long demanded 10 percent, Nick said, “I know it’s another below inflation pay rise. BT say that they can’t afford to give a pay rise that matches the rate of inflation but on the leaflets to the public when you buy a BT product, it says that their prices will increase with the RPI plus 3 percent. So they are actually going to request *their* pay from the customers, which is an inflation busting payroll price increase. They won’t offer the same terms and conditions for the workforce. Double standards.”

Nick said that he thought the strike was “understood by everyone in the general public. In 1987, when we went on strike at the time, I remember being jeered on the picket line and told to get back to work because people didn’t understand, because they weren’t empathetic to our problems. But this is something now that the public is feeling as well, isn’t it?”



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