UK: BT Group workers hold second day of national strikes

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Forty thousand Communication Workers Union (CWU) members across BT and its subsidiary Openreach held a second day of strike action Monday, following a 24-hour strike last Friday—the first national strike at the company in 35 years.

Workers are demanding a substantial pay increase after BT imposed a pay award rise of just £1,500 on 58,000 of its frontline staff—a rise of between 3 and 8 percent depending on salary. This represents a large real terms pay cut as annual RPI inflation was at 11.1 percent at that point. It has since climbed to almost 12 percent.

The strike was again solid with hundreds of picket lines set up in towns and cities across the UK. As was the case during last week's strikes by rail workers, strikers received broad support from the wider public, with passing cars beeping their horns.

Speaking to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters, workers on picket lines made clear their determination to fight BT's offensive to lower pay and reduce workers' terms and conditions, particularly by hitting new starters.

The company is making unprecedented attacks on its workforce even as it lavishes tens of millions in pay and bonuses on its top executives. BT's CEO Philip Jansen was recruited from payment processing company Worldpay. Upon joining BT, Jansen reportedly received a £43 million payout due to his substantial shareholdings in Worldpay, which had agreed to a £32 billion merger.

BT amassed £1.3 billion in profits last year and paid out over £700 million to shareholders. It has already made £400 million in after-tax profits for the first quarter this year. Jansen's own BT salary increased 32 percent to £3.5 million in the last financial year due to his share awards.

In talks since last November, ahead of an annual pay award due to be agreed in April, the CWU secured nothing from a corporation determined to protect its profits at all costs. After being granted a huge strike ballot mandate from its members, the union claimed that a combination of pressure on BT's shareholders and limited strikes would force the company to the table to negotiate a pay settlement.

A union official in Doncaster told a WSWS reporter that the aim of the strike is to get the company "back round the table. We are open to negotiate to the very end. BT have walked away from these conversations and they have now said there will be no more conversations."

No additional strike days have been named by the union, with the official stating when asked if any further stoppages would be announced, "We just want to get through today. We are open to negotiation."

The CWU has not altered course despite CEO Jansen declaring in the pages of the *Financial Times* last week that as far as he is concerned there is nothing to negotiate. The FT reported, "Asked whether he would consider increasing the pay rise offered to over 50,000 frontline staff in April, Jansen responded: 'Why would I do that?... It's history. It's done.'"

Rather than mobilise all-out action, co-ordinated with over a hundred thousand of its other members in dispute at Royal Mail and the Post Office, to defeat employers set on impoverishing their workforces, the CWU has made the BT dispute all about the intransigence of the one individual—Jansen.

Dubbing him "Foodbank Phil" after the foodbanks which have been opened at several BT sites to serve the workforce, so poor is their pay, the union tweeted Monday, "BT and Openreach members (and any supporters heading to the picket lines tomorrow)—don't

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forget to bring donations for the local foodbank. We can expose the actions of Foodbank Phil Jansen and help local communities at the same time."

This is a wretched appeal. Jansen will not be embarrassed because neither he nor his fellow shareholders nor the Tory government have any qualms whatsoever about workers being driven into reliance on foodbanks. The Tories have in fact lauded them as proof of British "community spirit," with several MPs posing for photo ops when new foodbanks open in their constituencies.

In the scores of 90 percent-plus mandates for strike action, including at BT and Openreach, the working class is demanding a fight to bring an end to foodbanks altogether, not stock them, and has the power to do so. But it is being restrained by the corporatist trade unions seeking a partnership with the employers.

The CWU combines its pleas to BT's shareholders with equally bankrupt appeals to the Labour Party and its leader Sir Keir Starmer, following the example of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Union.

Last Friday, CWU deputy general secretary Andy Kerr said of Labour MPs, "They should be a bit more vocal; they should be on the picket lines… The Labour Party needs to be seen to be supporting workers. Our worry is about getting Labour back into power. If Keir doesn't understand that, that he needs to get out there and fight for the working class of this country, we are never going to get back in power… If there was ever a need for a strong Labour leadership it's now."

Kerr was echoed Sunday by ASLEF leader Mick Whelan, whose train driver members struck on Saturday. Speaking on LBC radio he said of Starmer, "I do know generally he supports workers. And generally he has a policy that when Labour are in power after 12 years of the economy being destroyed by the current government that he's talking about growth and green transition." Summing up the union bureaucracy's relationship with the Labour leader, he said it was "Mainly cordial, occasionally fractious—we are firm critical friends."

Starmer and the Labour Party are just as viciously hostile to the interests of the working class as the Tories. The Labour leader has repeatedly opposed this summer's strikes, declaring, "The Labour Party in opposition needs to be the Labour Party in power. And a government doesn't go on picket lines, a government tries to resolve disputes."

After threatening Labour shadow ministers with disciplinary action, Starmer sacked Shadow Transport minister Sam Tarry last week after he attended a rail workers' picket line.

Tarry's sacking so thoroughly exposed Labour's right-wing, anti-working class politics that Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy was reported to have been "given permission by Sir Keir" to make a token visit to a BT picket line in her Wigan constituency Monday. However, the claim she had permission is vigorously disputed by forces close to Starmer's office, the *Guardian* reported. Starmer's office said Tarry was not been sacked for attending a picket line but for "making up policy on the hoof." Tarry's "crime" in this scenario was to oppose below-inflation pay deals.

Starmer's diktat has nevertheless been largely obeyed by Labour MPs, with only a minority attending picket lines in recent weeks, confirming the thoroughly pro-business character of the party and the impotence of the Labour "left."

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