

UK: Workers at Greater Manchester food plant walk out in wildcat strike over pay and conditions

Our reporters
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Workers held a two-day unofficial strike over pay and working conditions at the Cranswick Continental Foods processing plant in Pilsworth, Bury last week.

Workers in two shifts were involved and put forward demands based around seven points, including an increase in the number of staff on each production line; increased overtime pay to 50 percent of the hourly rate; increased pay in line with the national minimum wage increase; a £1 an hour increase for everyone in Cranswick; a stop to increasing production rates; and improved working conditions.

A similar strike took place at Cranswick's Preston, Hull site in December 2018, when 200 workers walked out over poor pay and working conditions. That strike was in defiance of the GMB trade union which the company said it had been "working with... for a number of months" prior to the wildcat action.

Staff at the Bury plant told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that they had a 30 minute break during a shift and two further ten-minute breaks in which they are able to go to the canteen and get a drink. An indication of the exploitative practises being deployed by the firm is that it describes these breaks, which are not in workers' contracts, as "comfort breaks".

Due to the production targets workers are expected to meet, staff were frequently taking breaks longer than 10 minutes to recover. They were extended to 15 minutes with the agreement of the company. One worker told the *Manchester Evening News*, "A lot of people feel that because of the targets they have to meet during that break time they need to rest, have a coffee. Generally they have marshals now in the canteen and they send you back on the line."

Another said, "People are tired, exhausted, and just

want to have proper breaks - drink, rest. If you want to go to the toilet you can go, if you want a sip of water you have that but there is no proper break."

A worker told the WSWS that it was the company cancelling the 15-minute breaks which sparked the walkout. Staff only went back to work having been told by management that the breaks would stay in place, but only for one month, before they are cut back to 10 minutes. A worker told the WSWS that would mean "we will be out [on strike] again."

Other grievances included low pay and staff cuts. A worker told our reporter, "We got a new director one year ago and now it's horrible. It's a hard job, hard working in the cold." This was the same director, they explained, who had been at the Hull plant in 2018 when conditions led to a walkout there.

Another worker complained about staff shortages: "There are only two people on the line when there should be double that". One said, for example, that in one non-production department workers "now have double the work and have to do everything, work for two people."

A production worker said that some staff did 37.5 hours a week, some 40 hours and others up to 47 hours. Everyone should be on decent pay and the same hours, he said.

Another grievance was that agency staff working alongside full-time contracted workers, and doing the same job, were paid less. A worker said that on a line there "could be six or seven people and five could be on £11.05 an hour and the next person on only £10.85." Workers could be kept on agency wages for a year before being taken on as contracted staff, the employee explained.

A young agency worker told the WSWS about inadequate breaks: "I'm on line 3 for eight hours, with half an hour for dinner and one break." The worker said that after an allotted break had been taken, "If you need the toilet they say no."

Cranswick employs 7,000 workers across 16 sites in the UK, producing fresh pork, gourmet sausages, cooked meat, air-dried bacon, cooked poultry, charcuterie, sandwiches and pastry products.

The £28 million purpose-built plant in Bury began operations at the Roach Bank Road site in 2018, employing around 600 workers from 52 different nationalities, including many from Eastern Europe.

Profits have grown at the company, with Cranswick posting a pre-tax profit rise of 5.6 percent to March 26 this year, up to £136.9 million. Revenues rose 5.8 percent to just over £2 billion, for the first time in the corporation's history.

Workers explained that during the lockdown the Bury factory had remained open and some employees contracted COVID.

In 2020, three workers at Cranswick's Wombwell processing plant outside Barnsley in South Yorkshire died following a COVID-19 outbreak. Seven workers ended up being hospitalised.

At the time the *Guardian* reported comments from a family member about the working conditions in the Wombwell plant. Speaking anonymously, she said that employees had initially been told that social distancing was not possible and masks would not be available because they were needed by the National Health Service.

Unlike in meat processing plants in Northern Ireland, where COVID cases had occurred, no deep cleaning had taken place and social distancing had only been implemented in the canteen area after the outbreak.

Due to their only receiving statutory sick pay (at the time £98.85 a week), many workers at the Barnsley plant went into work unwell as they could not afford to take time off. Workers' families were worried that those having to go into work would bring COVID back home, infecting their families.

Cranswick has a record of safety breaches and dangerous working conditions that have led to workers protesting.

In May 2007, cleaner Lynda Trebilock died horrifically when her head was cut off in a giant meat

blending machine at a DeliCo Ltd plant in Buckinghamshire. DeliCo had been bought by Cranswick Convenience Foods the previous year. DeliCo were fined £160,000 over the incident after being found guilty of breaching the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974.

In December 2009, James Hardcastle, a worker at the Wombwell plant, lost his hand when his arm became trapped in a machine. Investigations later showed that a supervisor had overridden a safety device and Hardcastle, who had been feeding meat into the machine, got his arm caught, leading to his hand having to be amputated.

Three months later another worker, Liam Hodgson, lost two of his fingers on his right hand when feeding plastic film used to wrap meats into a machine.

The conditions revealed in the Bury plant walkout—low pay, long hours and exhausted staff working in cold conditions being monitored by "marshals" and refused toilet breaks—are reminiscent of the brutal conditions in the dozens of textile factories which existed in the town in Victorian England. They underscore the offensive being carried out by the corporations who are ramping up their profits after declaring the pandemic over—at the expense of the pay and conditions of their workforce.

Workers everywhere are confronting the same attacks, combined with spiralling price rises making it impossible to live. The trade unions have allowed conditions such as those which exist at Cranswick to become part of normal working life. They offer no programme for a fightback today.

The Socialist Equality Party encourages workers at Cranswick to form a rank-and-file committee to take their struggle forward, in alliance with other workers across the company and in the wider food industry. The SEP offers every assistance and urges workers to contact us.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact