

Walkouts at Grangemouth oil refinery and Amazon as UK strike wave escalates

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Hundreds of contractors at the Ineos Grangemouth petrochemical plant in Scotland mounted a wildcat strike over pay Wednesday, blocking access to the refinery for three hours after walking out at 7 a.m.

Workers employed by several contractors were opposing a 2.5 percent pay award for this year and the same figure for next year. This is a de facto 10 percent pay cut, with inflation set to reach 13 percent within weeks.

The wildcat action takes place as Amazon warehouse and distribution workers continue a nationwide series of work stoppages and protests that began last week, opposing a pay rise of only 35-50 pence an hour, that hit sites in Tilbury, Coventry, Rugeley, Bristol, Coalville, Dartford, Belvedere, Hemel Hempstead and Chesterfield.

Ahead of a new round of strikes this week on the railways, further strikes in other key sectors have been announced.

In what could be one of the most economically devastating strikes, 1,900 dock workers at Felixstowe Dock and Railway Company are to down tools for eight days between August 21 and 29, rejecting an offer of a 7 percent raise plus a £500 bonus. Felixstowe is Britain's busiest container port, handling 48 percent of Britain's container traffic, and a strike would hit national supply chains, the logistics and haulage sectors, and international maritime trade.

On Saturday train drivers in the ASLEF union will strike for 24 hours over pay and conditions, hitting Arriva Rail London, Avanti West Coast, Crosscountry, Greater Anglia (including Stansted Express), Great Western, Hull Trains, LNER, London Overground, Southeastern and West Midlands Trains.

Two further days of strikes by 40,000 rail workers against Network Rail and more than a dozen train operating companies called by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union are set for August 18 and 20. 2,500 members of the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, including controllers and electrical control room operatives employed by Network Rail and members of Unite, will also strike on those days.

Some 10,000 London Underground workers in the RMT

are set to stage a 24-hour strike over pensions on August 19, joined by 400 workers on the London Overground employed by Arriva Rail London.

More than 1,600 London United bus drivers in the Unite union are also set to strike August 19-20 against a pay increase of just 3.6 percent in 2022 and 4.2 per cent next year. A strike by bus workers at Arriva North West who are members of Unite is in its third week.

On Monday, the Communication Workers Union announced four days of strikes over pay by more than 115,000 UK postal workers to be held on August 26 and 31, and September 8 and 9.

The 1,500 refuse workers at 15 Scottish councils are to strike from August 24-31 against a 2 percent pay award.

Criminal justice barristers have held numerous stoppages over seven weeks, including a recent five day stoppage and are being balloted for an uninterrupted walkout across crown courts in England and Wales from September 5.

Next month hundreds of thousands of nurses in England and Wales are being balloted to strike in a pay dispute by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) This would be the first ever strike by RCN nurses in England and Wales. Nurses in Scotland have voted in their ballot over pay which closed August 5, with the RCN yet to announce the results.

The University and College Union (UCU) is also launching a national ballot in the entire higher education (HE) sector towards strike action during the September term in what it called the "biggest pay, conditions and pensions campaign in the history of UK higher education." The UCU represents over 84,000 HE workers.

A general offensive against the employers and the Conservative government is developing, despite all efforts by the trade unions to keep separate a growing number of official strikes. It is being propelled by a cost-of-living crisis that is hurling millions of working people into a social catastrophe.

The uptick of strikes and ballots in Britain is part of an international movement propelled by the same issues and follows general strikes earlier this year in Greece, Italy and

Belgium. This week Ryanair cabin crew in Spain announced that following several days of industrial action in July, they will strike for the next five months. Walkouts in the dispute over pay and holiday entitlement will be held every week from Monday to Thursday.

This week it was forecast that a typical energy bill for UK households will be £4,266 a year from January 2023, a staggering rise from the £1,277 average payment in April this year. “Consumer champion” Martin Lewis warned that “millions of households will simply not be able to afford it... What we’re facing here is a financial emergency that risks lives.”

The ongoing contest to replace Boris Johnson as party leader between Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak has confirmed that the government is impervious to all demands to mitigate the crisis and is preparing further *repression*, not concessions.

Last month the Tory majority in parliament voted through legislation to allow agency workers to replace striking workers and has already quadrupled the fine for “unlawful strikes” to £1 million. It intends to ban strikes by different unions in the same workplace within a set period, impose an absolute limit of six pickets at points of critical national infrastructure, outlaw “intimidatory language” in strike ballots, delay strikes with a “right to respond” time for the employer, scrap the law allowing unions to make use of a strike mandate at any point in the next six months and impose a compulsory cooling-off periods after each strike, lasting up to 60 days.

Dealing with the Tory class war offensive is not possible without workers also dealing with the Labour Party and their partners in the trade union bureaucracy.

With struggles breaking out that would involve around three million workers if they were collectively mobilised, the union leaders have calibrated every strike being held or planned to ensure that no united offensive takes place. With very few exceptions, workers are striking for a few days with no co-ordination of anything.

Asked this week if he favoured a general strike, RMT leader Mick Lynch again insisted that he and other union leaders taking strike action had no power to do this. It was down to “business” to “play its part” by “giving the British worker a pay rise, that’s a fundamental.” But if that did not happen, then the Trades Union Congress “can call a general strike, not me, if they call it we’ll support it, absolutely...”

Behind this screen of exceedingly polite militant rhetoric, which leaves the employers and the TUC firmly in charge, union leaders such as Lynch, the CWU’s Dave Ward and Unite’s Sharon Graham shield the other great anti-working-class conspirator, the Labour Party, from challenge.

By constantly insisting that Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer

“come off the fence” and support workers in struggle, they try desperately to conceal that Labour is a party of big business working in tandem with the Tories. It is just as ruthless in its determination to clamp down on a fightback by the working class. Starmer has even banned shadow ministers from attending picket lines, declaring absolute hostility to strikes and to even the most minimal social reforms he denounces as “magic money tree” economics.

To take their struggles forward, workers must wage a combined industrial and political offensive against the ruling class and all its political representatives.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to build rank-and-file committees in every workplace and community to defeat the sabotage of the trade unions and begin the process of unifying their struggles into a general strike. Only such a unified movement can defeat a government preparing to wield the full might of the state against the working class.

The SEP also calls on workers to demand an immediate general election. Our aim is not to foster illusions in a non-existent parliamentary answer to the desperate situation facing workers, or to echo the claims of the trade unions that Labour, even under Starmer, is a lesser evil than the Tories. An election would expose the de facto Tory-Labour coalition and provide an opening for the working class to mount a joint political-industrial fight against both parties and build support for a socialist alternative to capitalism.

Workers must take control of their own political fate. They must wage a political struggle for socialism against all the Westminster conspirators now preparing all-out war against Russia and China and allowing the pandemic to run riot while destroying living standards and eviscerating democratic rights.



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