2,000 workers begin eight-day strike at UK's largest container port in Felixstowe

Our reporters
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Nearly 2,000 workers have begun eight days of strike action at Felixstowe port in Suffolk, on England's east coast. The Unite union members, including crane operative, tug boat operators and stevedores, have rejected a 7 percent pay offer from Port owner CK Hutchison Holding Ltd., whose Felixstowe Docks company has paid out £198 million in dividends since 2017.

Felixstowe is the UK's largest container port, responsible for about 48 percent of container traffic. It handles 4 million containers a year from 2,000 ships.

James Hookham, director of Global Shippers Forum, told the BBC a prolonged strike "has the potential to disrupt the UK's consumer supply chains at a critical period," pointing to three upcoming retail peaks—Halloween and the half-term holidays, Black Friday and Christmas.

He explained, "These containers are moving aboard some of the biggest ships in the world—think Ever Given—and are moving in such numbers and frequency that other routes or transport modes (overland by rail from China to Europe, or by air cargo) simply don't have the capacity to handle these numbers, at such short notice."

World Socialist Web Site reporters had a wide-ranging discussion with some of the 200 workers who attended the picket near the entrance to the port.

The strikers were animated over record corporate profits, especially in transport and logistics, while workers are struggling to make ends meet. They agreed that workers everywhere are facing "miserable" conditions and that these would worsen in winter, especially after the planned energy price hike.

A Unite spokesperson told the BBC Sunday morning that the union "wants to press for 10 percent", but as one worker pointed out, 10 percent is "probably not enough" given inflation which is already over 12 percent—and even if they agreed a 10 percent deal they might have to be back on strike again in January.

There are other concerns. Some workers mentioned conditions had worsened recently, especially around health and safety. Many raised the fact that they were required to work throughout the pandemic and given few to non-existent protections from the virus, and no additional pay.

One worker explained that the company now operate a tier system, with new hires coming in on £25,000 a year, far below more experienced workers doing a very similar job. A retired worker noted that benefits such as pensions and health insurance had been chipped away at over the past 30 years, with any pay rises tied to reduced entitlements. He added that poorer contracts are often "sweetened" with bonuses but that these are entirely at the discretion of management, who can decide when and whether to pay them, and do not count toward pension calculations.

Strikers denounced the anti-strike legislation being prepared by the Conservative government. One worker insisted that there should be a general election called, not "a contest between two extremely right-wing Tories [Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak in the Tory leadership election]."

There was broad agreement that the Labour Party does not represent the working class and that "we don't need Tories of a different colour."

Workers expressed solidarity with others on strike, especially at ports elsewhere in the country and internationally. Unite is currently sitting on a massive mandate for strike action at the Port of Liverpool, while the Verdi trade union in Germany is tying port workers up in negotiations with the employers. Strikers at Felixstowe agreed joint strike action with other dockers

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and were enthusiastic about the prospect of a general strike in the UK.

One dock worker gave an extended interview to the WSWS. He explained, “We’re on strike because we’ve put in for what we believe is a fair pay settlement to the company, and they’ve not met our expectations. It’s far below what we’ve put in for against the rising cost of inflation, on the back of the company’s profits being huge once again.

“We’ve got two-tier contracts so when you come in now as a new employee, you’re flexible and you must work up to getting better terms and conditions, what they class as legacy terms, which is more of a fixed shift and more pay for a similar job.”

Speaking about other sections of workers out on strike, he said, “It’s getting hard for working people. Throughout COVID we saw who was important in this country, with the hard work that everyone did; doctors, nurses, the railway and everyone else who was involved with keeping the country running. It’s sad when we see huge profits for corporations and working people are struggling with the rising cost of living; we want a fair society, we want fair pay.

Asked about a general strike, he replied, “We could quite possibly see one. You only need to see which way the government is heading: it’s really right-wing. I think we need to see fairer things and it could possibly lead to a general strike because of the cost of living whilst facing winter, people could potentially make a choice between heating and eating and trying to get doctors or to get dentists and all those things. And when you see these huge, huge profits for corporations and you see workers struggling harder, that’s not on.”

The worker added “It seems there is an international struggle,” since “as anyone with decent terms and conditions or an organised work force… we are all under attack. All those companies involved in logistics are making a fortune, and they seem to want to attack wages because workers are organised and have good terms and conditions throughout history, they’ve fought for those, and now they want to see them deteriorate for more profits.

“So, you should never rule anything out. I wouldn’t be surprised if other places end up on strike.”

Asked about the Labour Party’s hostility to strikes, he explained, “I’m a member of the Labour Party but I think they are not sticking to the principles of what they were originally about.”

He continued, “We want to see a fair society for everybody, and you’d like to think that Labour would be sticking up for that but unfortunately they don’t seem to be. If they carry on the way they are I think they won’t win [a general election], because people can see through it. People don’t want another Tory party.”

Discussing attacks on the strike being mounted by the government with the backing of the corporate media, the worker said, “For the Tory party to be saying they want to make it illegal, it will give no one a voice in the workplace, so only the bosses have a say. I think that’s where we’re heading and that will be a disaster for this country, and I don’t think that it will get better for anybody—any working person.

“If you haven’t got a voice, you haven’t got anything. We should have a fair share and a chance to have good conditions, good National Health Service and good services, and it should be a good country to live in. It’s a shame that just a few want to take everything and leave the many out.”

The docker concluded with the hope that the Felixstowe strike “gives other people inspiration to say actually you can have a voice, you can achieve things. Don’t be afraid to have that voice and fairness and the right results should always come out on top. So, I’d like to think that other people can gather momentum from what we’re doing here—we show solidarity and support to others, and we’ll make it a much better place to live in this country.”

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