

Worker at UK's Drax power station speaks out on pay and conditions in the industry

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Our reporter
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Two weeks ago, a wave of wildcat strikes by mainly subcontracted workers hit refineries and power stations in the UK, with workers pledging to take action every fortnight. They are protesting wages falling massively behind the spiralling cost of living.

Drax power station in North Yorkshire is the largest biomass power station in the UK providing about 6 percent of the national electricity supply. A number of sub-contracting firms operate at the site whose workers were involved in the August 12 walkout.

A worker at Drax told the *World Socialist Web Site* about the pay and conditions that sparked the recent walkouts at the facility and other plants in the energy sector. He has been employed in the industry all his adult life and worked at other power stations.

He said, “This fight at Drax is about the fact there's been a 14 percent pay cut in two years in comparison with the cost of living. Where I work, we got offered a pay rise and it was an insult. The conditions are horrendous. You're talking 60 degrees when you're working in the boiler room. With the hot weather recently, it was so hot people were almost collapsing and we have to stay there and work through it. We get treated like dogs.

“We were on under £15 an hour which is way under JIB [Joint Industry Board] rates and even with a recent insulting pay rise we only get just over £15 an hour. Supervisors got a big pay rise compared to us.

“I'm losing money every week as I'm on basic hours. I just don't do overtime. I'm paying for bills and petrol with my credit card. I'm starting to panic and stress about my mortgage.

“Other guys are working 10 hours a day, including Saturdays and Sundays as well. The thing is everyone is on different rates.

“You can have situations where apprentices can get paid more than us as they are on overtime, but I know of cases where they are on a normal rate of only £4 odd an hour and doing an electrician's work. There are situations at Drax where labourers are running cables and doing panel work. That is skilled work and you've got to be competent to wire it up.”

“You can see how much things have changed in the power industry for workers. When I was in my twenties, I was talking home £800 a week at one power station and I'm on only half of that now. I've got a mortgage, running a car and I'm starting to stress out.

“All the contractors here are backing each other up so everyone gets a pay rise.

“Then there's other things like short breaks, 15 minutes breaks. That's not illegal but it shows what conditions are like. I remember a few years ago at another power station there were 45 minute breakfast breaks, 90 minute dinner break and a break in mid-afternoon.

“I've started looking for other jobs. You can be a delivery driver now and get more money than I do.

“The walkouts here were unofficial and I think all the firms will be involved. It's about wages, they just haven't gone up. I've always survived all my life working on basic hours, never needed overtime, and now I can't.

“There's a situation where a worker I know travelled to a power station and when you take in petrol and

everything else he's on about £280 a week and has had to remortgage his house. He's working 12 hours a day and then the traveling is on top of that. It's dangerous. I know of cases of workers in the industry doing 16 hours a day and then travel to and from work on top. It's dangerous, that's how accidents happen."

The worker said that wages were being hit as profits in the industry were going up. "I heard from a Unite union member that they [Drax] made £40 million profit from green energy just this month. They are making a fortune. One of the directors at Drax is on £2.75 million a year. The previous firm he was at, Drax had to pay them £2 million just to get him here. It's not just in the power industry. This is happening everywhere".

Speaking about the enormous rise in household energy bills, the worker said, "The suppliers are making huge profits so why are they putting the prices up. It doesn't cost that much to produce the energy. It's nowhere near that. My bill for electricity and gas has gone up about four times from what it was. My petrol cost has nearly doubled. I've got a decent job but I don't know how other people out there are going to do it [pay the bills]."

"The strike at Drax was started by contract workers at Altrad, there's about 150 of them. It's one of the main contractors at Drax and has just been bought out by a billionaire. Altrad have just bought out Doosan Babcock, which is one of the biggest companies in the world.

"The strike we had was being planned before it happened, about a week before. The Unite union is involved. On the picket line, you had Altrad lads, Doosan lads were there, there were TEI workers and apparently even some of the full-time Drax guys were on the gate too. There were 124 on the main gate and pickets covered all three main gates. If we don't get anywhere with our pay claims it's going to taking place every two weeks on a Wednesday.

"At Drax and one of the contractors that I know about they don't recognise the 'Blue Book' [National Agreement for the Engineering and Construction Industry]. They don't abide by nothing. They don't abide by the JIB. If you are a JIB electrician you get £18.50 an hour, and fuel paid, milage and everything. We don't get any of that."

"I'm glad it's not just us at Drax fighting back, it's everywhere, It's great."



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