

# BT and Openreach workers return to picket lines across the UK:

“We need to be all out with rail and post and NHS, all of us are fighting the same issues”

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Around 40,000 call centre staff and engineers returned to the picket lines across the UK at BT and its subsidiary Openreach in a second round of two-day strike action. There were large turnouts, as was the case on July 31 and August 1.

The UK telecoms giant unilaterally implemented a below inflation pay deal in April presented as between 3 and 8 percent £1,500 for each worker. Chief executive Philip Jansen described this as “generous” after awarding himself a 32 percent raise bringing his annual remuneration to £3.5 million.

The company bypassed the Communication Workers Union (CWU), even after it agreed a pay freeze last year while telling members that a pay increase for 2022 had been provisionally approved. This year’s de facto pay cut has helped fund a £760 million payout to shareholders, compared to just £90 million set aside for a deal covering 58,000 telecom workers—over half the workforce.

With inflation climbing to over 12 percent, compounded by household energy bills rising by 80 percent in October, anger is growing. Up to 170,000 telecom and postal workers are involved in six days of staggered strike action, which began last Friday. The strike by 115,000 workers at Royal Mail is against a 2 percent pay award imposed in June, as the privatised postal company followed the actions of BT.

Post Office workers in the admin and supply chain were also out Tuesday following their action last Friday. They struck along with Crown Post Office workers, who continued their action begun last Saturday. Both groups number around 3,500.

In line with pay restraint on public sector workers, the government-owned service has only revised its original offer from 2 percent to 5 percent and a £500 lump sum after three previous rounds of stoppages from May. Last ditch attempts by the CWU to avert the action through arbitration talks failed after management refused to offer a token improvement.

BT has held fast to its imposed below-inflation award. Jansen dismissed the strike action, telling the *Financial Times* of the pay deal, “It’s history. It’s done.” Re-opened talks have been a farce.

The CWU has ratcheted up its rhetoric over blatant profiteering, but this is combined with pathetic pleas to the same chief executive it has dubbed “Food Bank Phil.” Food banks had been set up for call centre staff at EE—another of BT’s subsidiaries—attesting to the company’s poverty wages.

CWU General Secretary Dave Ward in a media interview Tuesday made a pathetic appeal to Jansen: “Get your hands dirty Philip. Come into the room negotiate a settlement. Treat the workers who have made the profits in the right way.”

The first strike at BT since 1987 is demonstrating telecom workers’ opposition to previous union-backed concessions agreed following privatisation. Discontent is brewing over the selective character of the strike action, with demands for a general strike.

The WSWS spoke with BT workers on the picket line at **Eldon House in central Sheffield**. They work in the planning sector on infrastructure for current and future network development for BT. Some had spoken to the WSWS during the first two-day stoppage and welcomed the coverage it has provided. Assumed names have been used to prevent victimisation.

Steve explained, “We need more support and to be all out with other workers such as rail and post and National Health Service. All of us are fighting the same issues. I can’t understand why the TUC [Trades Union Congress] haven’t organised a general strike. This is the only way we will win, but they are saying nothing about it.

“The CWU have been too cosy with BT management. BT have been closing down sites left, right and centre. There have been compulsory redundancies, changes to terms and conditions and the CWU haven’t had the backbone to say, ‘Stop it.’ Now due to the pandemic and cost of living crisis they have had to organise some action.

“The CWU should have opposed all this and gone on an immediate non-stop action to defeat the plans. It was beyond the pale, that’s where they should have said ‘enough is enough!’ Now we have got to the point where we have had to

have industrial action, but this should have happened 10 years ago.”

John said, “The strikes need leadership. We don’t have it. This is what we are missing. The unions are not leading this. The TUC are doing nothing, even though the government wants to ban all strikes. Mick Lynch of RMT [Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union] has had his members out and got lots of publicity. Why isn’t he fighting for a general strike? We can’t win this fight like this.”

A discussion began on the anti-union laws. John said that unions hide behind them and say, “there’s nothing we can do.” Union dues are not being used to defend workers or support strikers, he said. “There was a time when we got strike pay, not now. Where’s all our money gone? I checked the CWU website to see what they had been doing with my money, for 34 years. It says ‘come and join us, we are 189,00 members.’ Where is all that money going then? We pay about £15 a month.”

Steve interjected, “They are a business, the CWU they invest it, but not in strike pay. They are corrupt basically, that’s what you have to say about it. Where is the money going? Not to us.

“For 30 years I have been paying my dues, while they have let everything close down and cosy up to management. We are like a cash cow for the union. Our union is great at what I call the trickle effect. They will give us just a little bit, and expect us to say, ‘We haven’t got much but we got something, we are alright with that,’ instead of putting up a proper fight to get what we want and need.

“The CWU sold us down the river. They accepted different pay agreements for new starts which is way below what older workers have, such as us. It is a strategy of divide and conquer.”

John added, “What it means now is that workers on better conditions are the minority and they are better able to impose attacks on pay and conditions. We don’t blame the new starters for that. It was the CWU that agreed to this. There is a ten grand difference in pay now for workers doing the same job. The CWU is meant to be a democracy, then why didn’t they put this to the vote? They just imposed it.”

Other strikers listening to the discussion were asked if they agreed. One added, “I agree with everything. That has been my experience with the CWU, constantly selling us down the river.”

Another said, “I have worked here for 30 years, and I chose to work at BT as they had a good pension plan, and I could retire at 60 with a reasonable standard of living. But now I’m told I have to work until I’m 67-68. What the union kept saying was that our pensions were ‘a line in the sand’ which would never be crossed.

“I went to a meeting where Andy Kerr [CWU Assistant General Secretary] turned up and was shouting and bawling about ‘lines in the sand.’ We were all cheering and applauding and then the next thing we hear, the next day, is the line is gone

and so is our pension. They make promises they don’t keep. They have a lot to answer for.”

At BT’s **Sale Exchange site in Trafford, Greater Manchester** a young picket said, “We’re on strike because it’s not fair how the company is making vast profits and the workers are not getting a fair deal.”

A striking fibre installer said, “We worked throughout COVID, and the CEO reached the sales targets and the company made major profits and the CEO got a massive bonus. This is double standards.”

WSWS reporters raised the growing demand by workers in many sectors for a general strike. The picket responded, “I agree, and it looks like that is where it is going. The government are saying they will not intervene in our dispute as it’s a private company and the dispute is between the company and the employees. Yet they are intervening by bringing in laws to stop us going on strike.

“The only policy working is the greed policy and what is acceptable to the shareholders. But if we all stopped work there is only so much they can accomplish.”

On the picket line outside **Banbury Telephone Exchange**, a striker said, “Over the last couple of years we have seen the biggest pay decrease in 20 years. We have seen our chief executive get a 32 percent pay rise, with his million-pound bonuses. So we are taking action.

“Collectively, as workers we are looking at the fat cats getting richer, big companies making huge profits, BT itself has made a massive profit, and that is all on the back of us doing a hard day’s work and being told we are key workers.

“I think a general strike is where we are headed... That will get the message home that we are serious. A lot of people have had enough with rising costs. It is heading towards a winter of discontent.

“We are all facing a difficult Christmas with heating, fuel, and food. And we just want a fair deal.”

Addressing Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer banning his shadow front bench MPs from picket lines, the striker said, “He is happy with his millions, just like many of the politicians.”



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