UK: Unite averts further action at Felixstowe port after 1,900 dockworkers complete eight day strike

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Around 1,900 dockworkers ended eight days of strike action Monday in their fight for a pay increase at the largest UK container port on the east coast of England in Felixstowe, Suffolk.

The strike by members of the Unite union is the first at the port since 1989. It took place amid national strikes on the rail and the six-day selective strike action by postal and telecom workers. On Wednesday this week around 150,000 BT (including Openreach) and Royal Mail workers took part in national strike action, the largest numbers engaged in walkouts on a single day since the current strikes began in the UK.

Strikes by key sections of workers shows the potential to bring strategic sections of the economy to a halt, defeat the pay restraint imposed by major employers and deliver a blow to the Conservative government. Unite, together with the other unions, is keeping a lid on the growth of militant oppositiontrying to placate workers anger while policing the separation of struggles and limiting action. They work to cobble together revised offers below the inflation rate to demobilise the fight for genuine pay rises.

The strike at Felixstowe covered all sections of workers responsible for the operations of the port, which accounts for 48 percent of all UK container freight, with major exports to Europe. It involved crane operators, machine operators and stevedores who returned a vote on July 28 for action by a majority of 92 percent on an 81 percent turnout. They rejected an initial pay offer of just 5 percent. The attempts by Unite to prevent action ended in failure at arbitration talks, as management refused to offer anything more than 7 percent when inflation has already topped 12 percent.

The company claims the offer is 9 percent by including a £500 lump sum payment, but this is non-consolidated. Unite and other unions have allowed one-off payments to be accepted in pay negotiations to dress up below inflation deals. Management expressed disappointment in Unite, stating that since 1989 it had kept the port “strike free.” This cooperation included a below inflation deal last year of just 1.4 percent.

Felixstowe Dock and Railway Company is owned by Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison Holding Ltd, one of the largest foreign investors in Britain. It is ranked among the world’s foremost container terminal operators and is a global leader in port services, holding interests in 52 ports in 26 countries. Its operation at Felixstowe reported £61 million in pre-tax profits in 2020 while paying a dividend to shareholders of £99 million.

Unite has not confirmed any further strike action at Felixstowe since the eight-day stoppage. Instead, it has set the bar as low as possible for a settlement. National Officer Bobby Morton was cited by the BBC stating that between “7 percent and 12.3 percent” would be “acceptable.”

Unite is preventing another key section of port workers from joining the struggle at Felixstowe. On August 15 around 500 workers at Liverpool docks voted by 99 percent on an 88 percent turnout for strike action, rejecting a 7 percent “final offer” from Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC). Unite had announced before the ballot that “stoppages could begin at the end of August.” A separate strike ballot of 60 engineers at the port closed on August 24. As part of its stalling tactics Unite delayed announcing any strike dates which were only confirmed today for action to be scheduled from September 19 to October 3 by the port operatives and engineers.

MDHC is owned by the Peel Group and reported more than £30 million in profits in 2021.

A delegation of Liverpool dockers travelled down to

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Felixstowe as a mark of solidarity during the strike on Saturday, but the disputes are being kept apart to prevent action that could shut down 60 percent of Britain's container traffic.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham, speaking on the Felixstowe picket line last Wednesday, set out an orientation to the corporate boardroom and big business, not to other workers, stating, "I will be inviting the shareholders at CK Hutchison, the clients of CK Hutchison, the decision makers of CK Hutchison to meetings with me, to open the books on what is going on. The company refusal to settle the union claim is about corporate greed."

The attack is made in bad faith. Graham made clear the company could continue to wallow in its super-profits wrung out of workers in exchange for a revised offer pegged below inflation. She asked, "We are asking for 10 percent. What is the problem?"

Appealing to the employers while strangling strike action epitomises the "leverage" campaigns championed by Graham. The claim they met with success in the fight against fire-and-rehire at British Airways, Go North West buses and SPS Technology buries the truth. Ultimatums were withdrawn not because the employers retreated from their demands to axe jobs, reduce pay and conditions but because Unite was co-opted into enforcing cost cutting measures.

The WSWS spoke to dockers on the Felixstowe picket linewho explained that the 10 percent demand by Unite would not redress the cost-of-living crisis and expressed support for other dockworkers struggles in the UK and internationally.

Felixstowe and Britain's other ports are central to the Tory government's agenda to ramp up the exploitation of the working class via its newly created freeports, where big business can operate with virtually no obstacles to profit accumulation.

A powerful strike offensive realising dockworkers capacity to halt supply lines across UK and European ports requires a mobilisation against the government, which is implementing a raft of anti-strike legislation outlawing strikes in sectors of economy classified as critical.

The *Guardian* cited a global supply chain analyst who reported that ships had been redirected from Felixstowe to London Gateway "with a 45% increase in capacity volumes calling there" in the week before the walk out. Another contingency arrangement forecast was to reroute ships to smaller British and European ports including Rotterdam in the Netherlands and Wilhelmshaven in Germany.

In such a globalised area of the economy as ports and supply lines any successful struggle requires workers organise their fight across national borders. Such a struggle can only be waged through the formation of a rank-and-file committee by Felixstowe dockers, reaching out to workers at other ports. The transnational port and shipping companies' plans to defeat workers opposition depend on the trade unions suppressing strike action in the UK and internationally.

Prior to the Felixstowe strike, business commentators expressed their concerns about rerouting to other ports such as Germany. Thousands of port workers have been engaged in the first strike action in 40 years at the main seaports since June against the Central Association of German Seaport Operators (ZDS).

The determination to fight was expressed by three warning strikes in June and July at Wilhelmshaven, Hamburg, Emden, Bremerhaven, Bremen and Brake. But in response to ZDS breaking off further talks and amid legal challenges the union, Verdi worked to demobilise the opposition.

Rather than declare the negotiations a failure and balloting for action, Verdi is trying to ram through a rotten deal covering the 12,000 port workers. Deceptively presented as between 7.9 and 9.4 percent, it involves a basic hourly increase of only €1.20 euros. Even this will not be paid across the board. Additional money to address inflation are all in the form of one-off payments. Verdi is describing the substandard offer as "the best collective agreement in Germany so far this year."

To provide the means to wage the class struggle, the International Committee of the Fourth International initiated the call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance for Rank and File Committees, independent, democratic and militant organisations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. We encourage dockworkers in Felixstowe and Liverpool to contact the WSWS to discuss how to take forward this fight.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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