

One-day wildcat strike on North Sea oil rigs defies threats by employers and trade unions

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Oil and gas rig workers in the North Sea held a one-day unofficial strike last Thursday to demand a pay rise. They co-ordinated action across many platforms in defiance of threats made by the employers and trade unions.

The industry specialist news site *Energy Voice* (EV) listed 17 installations impacted, adding that “hundreds of workers took part.” Location where actions took place, according to the site were: Buzzard, Beryl Alpha, Armada, Judy, Britannia, Forties Echo, Bravo, Alpha and Delta, Gannet, Pioneer, Jade, Everest and Brae Alpha.

Companies affected included Bilfinger, Stork and Wood, with the strike involving workers in numerous offshore trades including scaffolders, painters, deck crew and fabricators. The 24-hour stoppage was co-ordinated through social media. Those who planned to participate were threatened with disciplinary action by management.

As the WSWS reported, the strike went ahead in the teeth of bitter opposition by the recognised trade unions Unite, the RMT and the GMB, who lined up squarely with the energy service firms contracted by the oil and gas corporations operating the rigs.

EV reported one day prior to the strike that “union and corporate representatives” of “energy services firms including Wood, Bilfinger and Stork” have “warned the action risks damaging the reputation of the North Sea, and the prospect of future deals on pay and jobs.”

Unite, the RMT and the GMB are defending the “reputation” of energy companies engaged in outright war profiteering from the conflict in Ukraine and the embargo on Russian exports, hiking up the price of fuel and energy. They are denying a living wage to workers who have worked throughout the pandemic and seen their real-terms wages plummet.

Among the installations impacted by the industrial action were the Judy platform operated by Harbour Energy and the Gannet complex run by Shell. Harbour Energy “has become the largest oil and gas producer in

UK waters with a tenfold increase in first half pre-tax profits of \$1.9 billion,” according to the *Financial Times*. Shell recorded second quarter profits of \$17.85 billion, a 107 percent increase from last year, bringing this year’s total profits to date to over \$20 billion.

Last Thursday was the second wildcat action by rig workers in the North Sea since May, when more than a thousand downed tools to demand a £7 increase in the base hourly rate—in what they called a “wage revolution.” The ending of the stoppages after more than a week relied on the trade unions isolating the action and overseeing a return to work. Unite organised this on the pretext that Bilfinger, the energy service firm at the centre of the dispute, had agreed to sign up to a collective bargaining body known as the Energy Service Agreement (ESA).

The demands of the strike were never seriously addressed. The 3 percent pay rise offered was later described by those involved in the action as “derisory since the profits are huge.”

Those organising the unofficial action have set up the Offshore Oil and Gas Workers Strike Committee, which has denounced the ESA and criticised the unions for years of inaction. A statement explained, “we can only get things done by taking things into our own hands... The whole of the UK is up in arms about the cost of living. We are no different.”

It was this determination that forced the trade unions to adopt an openly hostile position in defence of their pro-company alliance.

The three unions issued a joint response proclaiming, “Our concern is that unofficial action risks everything” that could be achieved through the ESA. “Trying a smash and grab job for short term gains we fear will only put the whole thing at risk.”

Any struggle against low pay requires a rebellion against the trade unions working with the energy service firms to hold down wages for the 5,000 workers covered

by the ESA—a corporatist arrangement designed to suppress workers’ demands. Collective bargaining agreements between the three unions and 14 employers set base pay rates. The thresholds are dictated by corporate interests to guarantee, in the ESA’s words, “stability and certainty on a substantive cost element for industry and investors” and the “sustainability of the supply chain.”

The rate adjustment mechanism (RAM) determining pay awards is calculated based on average inflation and oil and gas prices to bypass pay negotiations and avoid industrial disputes. The pay award for 2022 was worked out well in advance of the cost-of-living crisis and the mega-profits reaped by the oil and gas companies, giving a miserly sum of 2.32 percent.

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Unite is keeping a lid on strike action spreading to other key assets of the energy companies in the North Sea. The union had balloted medics working at six Shell installations for strike action over an insulting pay offer of 3.5 percent by United Healthcare Global. Unite reported that the company enjoyed profits of £8.9 million in 2020.

Although the walkout would only involve 12 workers, the installations would not have been able to operate in the event of strike action. But Unite cancelled the ballot, the result of which was due to be announced the same day as the unofficial action by rig workers. A Unite spokesperson told EV that it had “received an improved pay offer which they have accepted.” No public announcement has been made by the union about the details of the settlement.

Another collective bargaining agreement suppressing wages is the United Kingdom Drilling Contractors Association (UKDCA), involving major contractors such as Archer and Maersk, which has offered a pitiful 5 percent to 600 offshore drilling and maintenance workers. Unite is balloting its 300 members over strike action with the result not due until September 27. The union has stated the workers have had 'no meaningful pay increase for a number of years' but has made last ditch pleas for talks to avert strike action.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham ritually denounces “Filthy Rich” companies at the start of any dispute before enforcing below-inflation pay settlements to prevent a strike wave across key sectors of the economy, including the onshore oil industry. At the end of last year the union cancelled strike action at the UK’s second-largest oil refinery Stanlow, operated by Essar Oil

UK, and ended strike action at the country’s largest in Fawley, owned by ExxonMobil, for below-inflation pay deals.

The trade unions’ clampdown on wildcat action on North Sea rigs is of a piece with their calling off national strike action in response to the death of the queen. The RMT under Mick Lynch led the way, with all the other rail unions following suit. The Communication Workers Union led by Dave Ward ditched a strike of 115,000 Royal Mail workers halfway through a two-day action and Graham has ensured Unite cancelled three strikes against bus companies by thousands of drivers and depot staff.

The reverence shown to the royal embodiment of wealth and privilege confirms that these organisations will not wage any genuine fight as workers are plunged into social hardship without parallel since the Great Depression. Their weapon of choice is to cite the need for “national unity” in mourning the queen against the development of the class struggle of workers against an economic and social order which serves exclusively the corporate and financial elite.

The working class is faced with freeing its struggles from a vast bureaucratic apparatus which functions as an industrial police force. North Sea oil rig workers have taken an important step in this direction. This should become the basis of a network of rank-and-file committees, genuine and democratic organisations of struggle which break down the sectional barriers between offshore and onshore workers, contractors and those directly employed by the energy corporations. The committees can reach out to oil and gas workers across the world to mobilise their collective strength against the global energy corporations in defence of their living standards.



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