

Liverpool dockers launch two-week strike with Felixstowe to follow

Tony Robson
21 September 2022

Over 560 Liverpool port operatives and maintenance engineers have begun two weeks of strike action from September 19 to October 3, rejecting an 8.3 percent offer from the Peel Group which operates Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC).

Peel Group is demanding a de facto pay cut. The company is an infrastructure and property investment business which boasts of having “collective investments owned and under management of more than £5 billion.” It reported profits of more than £30 million in 2021 from its operations at MDHC.

The WSWS spoke with dockers on the well-attended picket lines. One explained, “This strike isn’t just about pay. It is about conditions which have deteriorated over years. The job I do driving a machine to move things from place to place can be dangerous.

“The grounds I drive through are full of potholes and if I hit a bad one the machine could topple over and I would have no chance, I would be killed if the machine fell.

“I work 60/70 hours a week just to live and for my family to live. We are employed to do 40 hours a week, but I can’t afford to only work 40 hours. How is it right I am working all these hours? When am I seeing my family? We are doing all the work. It’s a desperate time for the working class.”

More than 1,900 dock workers at the largest UK container port in Felixstowe on the east coast of England are set to take part in their second round of eight-day strike action from September 27 to October 5. They are opposing a derisory pay award of 7 percent.

The previous strike in the last week of August demonstrated the enormous social power of dock workers, closing a port accounting for 48 percent of UK container freight. Felixstowe Dock and Railway company is owned by Hong Kong based CK Hutchison

Holdings Ltd, which holds interests in 52 ports in 26 countries. The company paid out £99 million to its shareholders from the profits of its Felixstowe operations last year.

The combined action by dock workers at both ports has the capacity to shut down 60 percent of all UK container traffic.

The strike action at Liverpool and Felixstowe will coincide for six days from next week but Unite is proceeding as if the struggles are separate. Their necessary unification is being prevented, protecting not only the companies involved but Truss’s Conservative government which is committed to outlawing strikes in essential services to spearhead its class war agenda.

Under the leadership of Sharon Graham, Unite has been at the centre of suppressing a national strike wave. As the largest private sector union in the UK, this has involved smothering action across key sectors such as transport, logistics and warehousing, manufacturing and the oil industry.

A false narrative has been built around proclaimed “pay victories.” In her election manifesto for general secretary last August, Graham stated that “anything below RPI [Retail Prices Index inflation rate] is a pay cut.” But she has hailed one settlement after another ending strikes on terms below RPI and has advocated a pay settlement of 10 percent in the Felixstowe dispute. RPI is currently at 12.3 percent.

Strike action has been stalled and staggered at both ports. Liverpool dockers voted in mid-August by 99 percent to strike against a 7 percent offer. Unite originally stated action could start by the end of the month, but a strike was delayed because the union decided to ballot engineers separately. The strike began on Monday evening only after the queen’s state funeral as Unite joined the Rail, Maritime and Transport union

(RMT) and Communication Workers Union in enforcing a period of national mourning.

The royal spectacle has been used to drive the cost-of-living crisis from the front pages and place the working class on the back foot, summed up by RMT leader Mick Lynch calling on the Truss government to act in the “national interests.”

Since the first 8-day stoppage at Felixstowe, Unite has attempted to tie everything up in negotiations, avoiding announcing further industrial action for over a fortnight. It set the bar as low as possible for management to offer a meagre revision. Unite national officer Bobby Morton told the BBC between “7 percent and 12.3 percent” would be “acceptable.”

Unite’s appeals for the company to work with the union to prevent further strike action have fallen through. Its September 13 press release stated that the company “unilaterally ended pay talks after refusing to improve its pay offer and instead announced that it was imposing a pay deal of seven per cent on the workforce.”

This has exposed the entire “leverage” strategy of Unite. On the picket line at Felixstowe during the last strike, Graham declared before a rally that she intended to host meetings with shareholders, investors, decision makers at CK Hutchison and their clients. No workers should be taken in by these moral appeals against “corporate greed.” They are pitched by highly paid executives of Unite acting as an industrial police force to curb demands for a genuine pay rise.

The professed outrage by Unite over corporate greed ends as soon as the bureaucracy are incorporated into cost-cutting plans. Any docker wanting to know about the “success” of leverage campaigns to reverse fire and rehire should speak to workers at BA, Go North West buses and SPS Technology who have been on the receiving end of union-endorsed job losses, pay cuts and the tearing up of conditions.

For their struggle to succeed, dockworkers need the genuine leverage of the class struggle, not the pro-corporate leverage of Unite. In such a globalised area of the economy, with ports serving as hubs for international supply lines, any successful struggle requires organising across national boundaries.

The struggle at the ports in Liverpool and Felixstowe are developing within the context of an emerging opposition of dockworkers internationally. Last

Saturday around 200 dock and warehouses workers in Canada walked off the job shutting Westshore Terminals Ltd and the Delta coal port in Vancouver, British Columbia. Workers have been kept on the job without a contract since January 2022 by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). In Quebec longshoreman who voted for strike action were locked out after the Canadian Union of Public Employees sat on the mandate.

ILWU President Willie Adams has issued a token message of solidarity, but in the US the union has worked closely with the Biden administration to prevent work stoppages at critical ports such as Los Angeles and Long Beach. Over 22,000 West Coast dockers have been left without a contract for more than two months without the ILWU even setting a date for a strike ballot.

In Germany the Verdi union dedicated itself to ramming through a substandard pay settlement on 12,000 dockers, based on a €1.20 an hour increase and lump sum payments after thousands of workers at the northern sea ports took warnings strikes in June and July.

Liverpool and Felixstowe port workers should establish rank-and-file committees to break down sectional barriers and reach out to their allies internationally. Such committees can draw up a pay demand based upon an inflation-busting pay rise, redirecting the profits plundered from their labour by the corporations.

To provide the means to wage this struggle, the International Committee of the Fourth International initiated the call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. 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:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)