Further pay strike set to bring Liverpool docks to a standstill as Felixstowe threatens more walkouts

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Dockers in Liverpool, northwest England, are to extend their strikes at the UK's second largest port with a further stoppage planned from October 11 to 17.

Dockers at the UK's largest port, Felixstowe on the southeast coast, are threatening to resume their stoppage. Felixstowe dockers previously walked out for eight days from September 27. This coincided for seven days with the 15-day strike by Liverpool dockers which ended on Monday.

Senior control room operators and control room operators at Liverpool voted to join the 560 port operators and engineers, who first walked out on September 19 after rejecting a pay offer of between 7 and 8.3 percent. Inflation is currently at 12.3 percent, but is set to increase after the government's mini-budget sparked a run on the pound, coupled with rising interest rates.

According to a September 29 Unite union statement, "the port's dock masters, shift managers and vessel traffic services officers are also preparing to be balloted for strike action. The combined impact of so many roles striking means the entire port will 'literally become inoperable'".

As well as pay, the dispute concerns Mersey Docks and Harbour Company's (MDHC) failure to honour a 2021 pay deal agreed with Unite, supposedly to improve shift rotas and a promised pay review. The last pay review was in 1995.

Dockers who worked in horrendous conditions as essential workers during the pandemic, risking their lives, face a pay cut from an employer which made more than £30 million in profits in 2021.

A plant operator of 21 years told WSWS reporters, "We're striking for better pay and conditions. Some of the lads work one week of five days on and three days off, and then a week on nights, on 12-hour shifts. That messes up with your body clock. And it's 60 hours a week. Before that they were working six days on and two days off, which was 72 hours a week.

"My doctor didn't believe it. He said, 'That sounds illegal and you're still doing it at 60 years of age!'

"We had an occupational health adviser coming, she signed off 40 odd men on the sick with high blood pressure. These were young men, 30-odd year-olds, with high blood pressure, IBS, intestinal problems. It's not right! It's scandalous!"

Another veteran docker said, "The ground on the docks shouldn't even be driven on for health and safety reasons. There's pot holes everywhere, you have to drive over them for 12 hours. Bounce! Bounce! Bounce!

"You've got no life, a 12-hour shift, climbing up a 90-foot ladder into a glass box, and they're constantly throwing work at you. You're worn out after two hours. My back's gone with it. I can't stand anymore.

"The last straw was in February, up in a freezing, icy machine, I couldn't even see out of the windows. I got pains in my chest and ended up in hospital."

MDHC is part of Peel Ports, owned by the Peel Group based on the Isle of Man tax haven. Peel Ports is also the port authority for the Manchester Ship Canal, the River Medway, parts of the river Clyde, 12 Quays at Birkenhead and Heysham Port.

Peel Ports paid out around £300 million in dividends the past five years. In 2021, the company's highest paid director was awarded £4.5 million, up from £1.6 million in 2020. Peel group's majority owner John Whittaker is worth £1.4 billion.

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On September 27, Liverpool dockers cheered on by bystanders marched to the venue of the Labour Party annual conference, being held in the city. They chanted, “The dockers united will never be defeated” and on arrival, one striker shouted, “Where are you Starmer? All for the workers, are you? Well, we’re here.”

Needless to say, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer refused to come out. Throughout the summer strike wave, Starmer forbade shadow cabinet members to join picket lines.

Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn greeted the pickets with words he has no intention of fighting for, “We need a fundamental approach, a fundamental redistribution of wealth.” As Labour party leader, he refused to mobilise his thousands of supporters to drive out the Blairites and paved the way for their return in the person of Starmer. Nearly two year ago, Corbyn was booted out of the Parliamentary Labour Party by Starmer, as part of the anti-Semitism witch-hunt, and still Corbyn remains a member of this right-wing party.

Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) union leader Mick Lynch said, “We need synchronised action, we need ordinary men and women in this country coming back together, back to trade union values, with Unite, the RMT, the teachers, the health service workers.”

Workers struggles are growing, fuelled by the cost of living crisis to pay for the war in Ukraine, and bank, energy and pandemic bailouts—after decades of suppression by the trade union bureaucracy. This was apparent on Saturday, which saw joint strike action by 170,000 striking rail, postal workers and dockers.

Workers, however, will only suffer defeat led by the trade union bureaucracy and the dwindling Labour “left”. All are opposed to an indefinite general strike across all sectors, to mobilise the full strength of the working class, as they seek to end the ongoing disputes with rotten deals.

Dockers in Liverpool and Felixstowe together handle 60 percent of UK container freight and are thus in a powerful position, alongside their international counterparts, in the global supply chain. The union refuses to unite the strikes at Liverpool and Felixstowe. A Unite union rep in Felixstowe told WSWS reporters, “We would love to coordinate action, but they are *two separate disputes.* We fully support our comrades in Liverpool as they do us, *but these strikes landed together by coincidence not by planning*.” [emphasis added]

While management at Liverpool or Felixstowe have made no compromises, Unite sows the illusions that the corporations running the ports can be made to act in the interests of workers and not their profits. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham said, “MDHC needs to keep its previous pay promises and put forward a proper pay rise now.”

At Felixstowe, Graham is urging dockers to accept a below inflation 10 percent, as opposed to the company offer of 7 percent. Felixstowe Dock and Railway company is owned by Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison Holdings Ltd, with interests in 52 ports in 26 countries. Shareholders received £99 million from the profits of operations at Felixstowe last year.

Unite will not mobilise its thousands of other members at the UK’s ports—a small part its 1.4 million strong membership in transport, logistics and warehousing, manufacturing and the oil industry—because that would involve challenging soon to be strengthened anti-strike laws, threatening the union’s coffers which ensure a prosperous lifestyle for the union tops.

To unleash the enormous power of the working class requires new organisations, rank-and-file committees that unite workers, reaching beyond national borders in solidarity with workers also fighting the same global corporations. These must be taken into ownership, based on a socialist programme and not profit interests, and run democratically by the working class.

The International Committee of the Fourth International has initiated the call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We encourage dockworkers in Liverpool and Felixstowe to contact the WSWS to discuss how to take this fight forward.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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