

UK: BT Group workers national strike resumes, including emergency call handlers for first time

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6 October 2022

40,000 call centre workers and engineers at BT and its Openreach subsidiary began four days of national strike action on Thursday. The other strike days are October 10, 20 and 24.

The workers, who have already held four days of strikes since July 29, were joined on Thursday for the first time by more than 500 emergency (999) call handlers.

The strike, called by the Communication Workers Union (CWU), includes 30,000 Openreach engineers and 10,000 BT call centre workers. They are fighting management's implementation in April of a flat-rate pay rise of just £1,500. The award represents an average pay rise of 4.8 percent, while RPI inflation is at 12.3 percent.

The company refuses to pay staff a living wage, despite the fact that it is drowning in profits—£1.3 billion last year, with £761 million paid out in shareholder dividends. In a news update Thursday, the CWU noted, “BT CEO Philip Jansen has seen a 32% rise in his overall remuneration package this year (up from £2,628,000 in 2021 to £3,460,000 in 2022), while the company's financial officer Simon Lowth has seen his overall package increase by 25%.”

While sanctioning the latest round of strikes, the CWU is doing all it can to reach a deal with management based on a below-inflation deal. Its news piece is replete with pleas to management to come to the negotiating table. It begins, “Despite repeated CWU appeals to senior management to return to the negotiating table to achieve a fair and just settlement of an increasingly bitter pay dispute that has already seen four days of industrial action, bosses have failed to show any interest whatsoever in resolving the industrial

relations conflagration.”

It then denounces “the company's continuing refusal to enter into meaningful negotiations with the CWU,” accusing the firm of “patently untrue public pronouncements about ‘protracted pay discussions’ with the union that simply never happened!”

The piece concludes with Deputy General Secretary Andy Kerr stating, “Time and time again, we've asked for negotiations, only to be ignored by a senior management that could not be less interested in addressing the anger that exists in their workplaces.”

If the union is successful in its entreaties to BT, it is clear on what terms they will seek to sell out the strike. The *Financial Times* reported Thursday that as the BT Group strike began, “Virgin Media O2 announced that it was planning to introduce a new £1,400 payment for employees earning £35,000 and under. Including a 3 per cent pay rise earlier in the year, and bonus payments, the new offer equates to a more than 10 per cent pay rise for the company's lowest paid staff.”

The FT then notes of the below-inflation offer, “Andy Kerr, deputy general secretary of the CWU, responsible for telecoms, said that the Virgin Media O2 offer is ‘the kind of thing we'd be willing to look at’ for BT staff.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke to striking BT workers in Wrexham, North Wales. Openreach worker Paul said of the situation facing workers, “There's no morale left. They've been digging away at little things, benefits and things, and then the pay issue was the last straw.

“We were out there in the pandemic making the company money, and they have just given it to the shareholders and kept it for themselves. Staff are not

being paid enough. They've even set foodbanks up in the BT call centres, at work."

Wayne Callaghan, a CWU union rep for North Wales and Chester, said, "We are striking because they imposed a £1,500 pay rise on us without negotiating. With the cost of living crisis, £1,500 is nowhere near covering people's bills. Some of the lowest paid people in the country work in BT call centres, they are having to use food banks. We've got call centre workers doing 37 hours a week, working 10-hour shifts, and they can't afford to pay for the petrol to get into work.

Callaghan said he thought, "We are heading towards a general strike. Nurses are talking about coming out now, we've got posties out, the rail is out, we've got BT out. We are looking towards a winter of discontent."

Debbie, who works in BT service delivery, said, "It's about the future too. What are the future employees going to come into? The worst contracts ever." On BT's use of foodbanks, she said, "Philip Jensen thought he was helping out, but he'd help out by giving us a pay rise."

Asked what she thought of the union calling out its striking postal members on separate days to BT workers, Debbie replied, "We were saying this earlier that if everyone who was going to strike does so on a certain day that would have a bigger impact. Today we have got the 999 workers out for the first time and hopefully that will have an impact."

Asked about a general strike aimed at bringing down the Conservative government, she said, "All I can say is that money goes to money and they don't like the working class."

At Openreach's depot and training centre in Bradford, a picket who works with BT engineers said, "I think the whole country's had enough, they are taking us for granted. What has got me is that from the first strike Jansen came out and said that we have proved that we can work through mass absences due to the pandemic. None of this lot was absent through the pandemic, we all lived through it with our families. For him to say that, that really annoyed me."

The striker said, "with the 999 workers going out on strike it may make them sit up a bit. It shouldn't come to this to make workers feel valued."

With workers in many sectors striking over the last few months and more sectors of the working class

coming into struggle, he said, "We are moving towards a general strike and I've heard there is a move to bring the posties and BT/Openreach out together."



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