

Striking Liverpool dockers defy redundancy threats, announce further strikes

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UK dockers at the port of Liverpool have answered company intimidation by announcing two further weeks of strike action, from October 24 to November 7. Unite is also set to ballot the port's dock masters, shift managers and vessel traffic services officers, which would shut the port completely.

The Liverpool strike however is in danger of being isolated, as no further action has been announced by Unite at Felixstowe port following two eight-day strikes.

Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC) in Liverpool, the UK's second largest port, responded to a second dock strike by issuing redundancy notices. MDHC resumed its previously shelved plans to sack 132 dockers from its 600-strong workforce following a walkout on October 11-17. The company cited a slump in container traffic, rising interest rates and higher energy costs, contrasting with plans a year ago to expand the port.

The Unite union members first walked out on September 19 for two weeks, after rejecting an inadequate pay offer of between 7 and 8.3 percent, though MDHC claim the figure on offer is 10.2 percent.

The workers want a rise that matches inflation, which is currently at 12.6 percent RPI and is expected to rise still further in the months ahead. Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham addressed a rally of the striking dockers, pledging "to defend jobs, pay and conditions" and declaring, "We will not accept pay cuts. We will not accept the way we are being treated."

This is merely rhetoric. In a press release on October 14, Unite's national coordinating officer Steven Gerrard said, "If Peel [MDHC parent company] had genuinely offered 10.2 per cent to all grades, we would ballot our members. But they haven't, nor have they

addressed their failure to implement 2021's pay agreement."

That Unite is prepared to renege on dock workers' demand for a cost-of-living increase is signalled as well by its approving references to the company agreeing an 11 percent pay rise at the Camel Laird shipbuilder in Birkenhead.

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

Dockers at the UK's largest port in Felixstowe on England's south east coast are also in dispute with their employer, Felixstowe Dock and Railway company, owned by Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison Holdings Ltd, which has interests in 52 ports in 26 countries.

Paul Davey, head of corporate affairs at Hutchison ports, told a cross-party parliamentary Transport Select Committee last Wednesday that all negotiations for 2022 had been closed with its unilateral imposition of a 7 percent pay award in September. He added there had been "exchanges" with Unite about the award for 2023 due in three months' time.

Unite officials at Felixstowe have flagged their support for a below-inflation 10 percent pay demand while acknowledging the company could afford 50 percent more and still be in profit.

Davey claimed the strike at Felixstowe did not have "any real significant impact" on supply chains, and that customers had diverted ships elsewhere or delayed shipments to avoid strike days. He said that due to the onset of recession and fall in demand, customers had already stockpiled goods for Christmas.

Liverpool and Felixstowe handle 60 percent of all

container freight entering and leaving the UK and are thus a key link in global supply chains. Yet the strikes at Liverpool and Felixstowe are being separated by Unite, only coinciding for one week from September 27. Unite's regional officer Miles Hubbard described the stoppage at Felixstowe as a "local dispute." Neither has Unite closed other UK ports or reached out to ports across Europe and the United States where workers face the same assault on pay and conditions.

Despite Graham telling dockers, "When we act together, we win," the aim of the union tops is to secure a place at the negotiating table where they can collaborate with employers to impose whatever attacks they can get away with to maximise profits.

WSWS reporters spoke to dockers on the picket line in Liverpool who expressed support for unified action and a general strike. A union rep explained that "two years ago our branch drafted a motion for a general strike. I support a general strike, but it's not to be imposed. Dockers from Tilbury and Southampton came up to support us. Southampton [dockers] refused to work our ships."

Another docker stated, "Fifty of us went down on a coach to support Felixstowe dockers... the conditions there are the same as ours. I'm bitterly disappointed they're going back to work."

WSWS reporters discussed the fight for a general strike to defeat the Tory government's class war agenda, and the demand raised by the Socialist Equality Party for a general election to oppose the joint conspiracy by Tories and Labour to impose brutal austerity in support of an escalating military intervention by NATO against Russia, which threatens to ignite World War Three.

Senior Unite officials intervened, attempting to forbid any such discussion. Unite National Co-ordinator Steven Gerrard instructed a union rep over the phone that WSWS reporters could not speak to pickets about either a general strike or a general election.

Unite officials enforcing such political bans must be called to order. Their censorship against WSWS is a flagrant attack on free speech and on workers' democratic right to discuss the way forward. Under conditions where the Tory government is legislating to ban protests and outlaw the right to strike, such clampdowns on political discussion in the working class serve the most reactionary ends.

Dock workers at Liverpool and Felixstowe clearly see the need to unify their struggles. Unite's efforts to silence discussion are made in defence of a failed strategy of division. To defeat intransigent employers backed by the state, rank-and-file workers must take control of the dispute and elect rank-and-file strike committees to unify their struggles. Such committees can coordinate support from rail, post, oil refinery and BT workers, whose struggles are also being divided, issuing the call for solidarity strikes by dock workers internationally.

Port workers are not only locked in struggle against the Tory government, but against a Labour opposition that has denounced strikes, banned MPs from visiting picket lines, and which claims there is "no magic money tree" to fund urgent social needs. Rank-and-file committees must reject the calls for "sacrifice" and raise the demand for the nationalisation of the shipping and port authorities under the democratic control of the working class.

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 massively from £1.6 million in 2020. Peel group's majority owner John Whittaker's fortune amounts to £1.4 billion. MDHC made more than £30 million in profits in 2021.

On May Day 2021 the International Committee of the Fourth International initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees that is fighting to unite the struggle of workers worldwide. We invite dockworkers in Felixstowe and Liverpool to contact us today with information about their strike and to discuss the way forward.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact