

UK dockers at port of Liverpool hold further two-week strike

Margot Miller**7 November 2022**

On Friday, around 600 UK dockers at the Mersey Docks and Harbour company (MDHC) in Liverpool ended a two-week strike, the third round of stoppages since September.

In their struggle over pay and conditions, they have defied intimidation from the company, which issued 132 redundancy notices, and face the isolation of their strike by the Unite union.

Such is the determination of the workers that further action seems imminent, from November 14-21, after they voted down the latest pay offer at a mass meeting. According to supply chain publication *Loadstar*, the director of Liverpool Container T1 and T2, Richard Mitchell broke the news, though this has yet to be confirmed by Unite.

Unite regional coordinator, Franny Joyce, contested the figure of 11 percent the company said was on offer, as an average and misleading. Workers in six categories would receive 9.5 percent—well below RPI inflation at 12.6 percent—excluding a one-off sweetener.

The dockers first walked out for two weeks in opposition to an offer of between 7 to 8.3 percent, though MDHC, owned by Peel Ports, claimed that figure was 10.2 percent. Peel Ports made £141 million in profit last year.

Admitting the union is prepared to accept a de facto pay cut, Unite national coordinating officer, Steven Gerrard, said, “If Peel had genuinely offered 10.2 percent to all grades, we would ballot our members.”

As the last stoppage got underway, Peel Ports scuppered a deal between MDHC and Unite that union officials agreed to in principle, according to the *Guardian*.

When WSWS reporters visited the picket line in Liverpool, striking dock worker Fred said, “As far as I know, the offer was 10 percent, which is still below

inflation and Peel Port added the demand for compulsory redundancies to be included in any deal and this was unacceptable to the members.”

Fred went on to say, “The problem the working class have is that we are behind the curve and have been for a long time. The Tories, the bosses are ahead of the curve but now we are starting to catch up. If it were up to me, I would nationalise all the industries under democratic workers’ control.”

Asked about unifying the struggles of Liverpool dockers with dock workers at other ports, and with workers across all sectors facing the cost-of-living crisis, another docker Mike said, “I’m all for co-ordinated strike action. We need united action to show the strength of workers who are in struggle”.

Regarding a general election, he said, “For me I would like to see pickets from the docks the nurses, the buses, the trains, all standing as candidates. Workers should stand as candidates.”

When WSWS reporters asked how the strike is being managed by the union bureaucracy and raised the need for workers to take control of disputes themselves, Mike answered, “We run this strike, the rank-and-file members. It’s up to us what happens.”

“They are trying to intimidate us back to work and crush strikes and drive us backwards. Britain is the home of the industrialised working class. It’s the home of trade unions and the British working class is like an elephant. We don’t forget and when we move our feet, we dig them in like clay. As Rosa Luxemburg, said we face socialism or barbarism.”

Another young docker, Jake, said, “The pickets have received phone calls from the management asking them what they thought of the deal and if they would consider crossing the picket line. I received a phone call and was asked about accepting the deal with the job

losses and crossing the picket line. I put the phone down. Some of the younger strikers were feeling the pressure with rents, mortgages and mouths to feed and management were selecting those they believed had dependents to ring up.”

“We have to stick it out,” he continued. “We have to fight. It’s all or nothing, we have to fight or die. My grandfather worked the docks and many of the pickets lived in the vicinity and he and many others knew the history of the struggles of dockworkers going back to the pen system [dockers had to line up daily for casual employment].”

Workers readily engage in political discussion with WSWs reporters, sensing what they face involves a political struggle against both the Conservative government, and a possible Labour government after a general election. Labour leader Starmer refused to meet striking dockers outside the Labour party conference and opposes strikes. The message from the union bureaucracy, however, is that there should be no talk of either a general strike or general election on the picket line.

The sentiment of workers is in sharp contrast with the divisive strategy of the union tops. No further strikes have been called by Unite at Felixstowe, the biggest container port in the UK, where workers took two eight-day pay strikes, and a further week’s stoppage from September 27 coinciding with the strike at port Liverpool. Liverpool and Felixstowe which together handle 60 percent of all container freight were treated as separate disputes by Unite.

Paul Davey, head of corporate affairs at Hutchison ports which owns Felixstowe, told the Transport Select Committee that negotiation for 2022 were closed and a 7 percent pay award was imposed unilaterally in September.

The danger is that Unite, following in the footsteps of the postal workers’ union the CWU and the rail workers union, the RMT, will try to wrap up further action, and push through a below inflation deal with voluntary redundancies. The unions are preparing to enter a contract with a Labour government and big business to save British capitalism at the expense of the working class.

With endless negotiations and isolated strikes, Unite hopes to wear down the resistance of the dockers until a sellout deal can be cut. It has negotiated such deals up

and down the country, the latest being the 10.5 percent pushed through at Go-Ahead buses in London.

Unite commissioned a poverty survey of 6,000 adults carried out by Survation, released November 3. It revealed that 54 percent of those polled said they would either be unable to pay household bills this year, or would have difficulty doing so. Almost a third were already in debt just to put food on the table. “An astonishing 70 percent have suffered a real terms pay cut”, while Unite’s own research puts profits at up by 47 percent.

To take forward the fight to defend jobs and wages and unleash the full power of the working class requires new organizations—rank and file committees democratically controlled by workers that cross national borders to fight for international solidarity strikes against the global companies, which must be taken into socialist ownership and run by the working class.

For this purpose, the International Committee of the Fourth International initiated the call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We invite UK dockworkers to contact the WSWs today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact