Menzies ground staff strike at Heathrow Airport

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Ground handling staff at London Heathrow, one of the world's busiest airports, held a 72-hour strike last week. From 4 a.m. on November 18, 350 members of the Unite union employed by Menzies Aviation walked out against what Unite referred to as "derisory pay offers."

At the start of November Unite said that the pay offer to Menzies workers was between 2 and 6 percent, well below half of RPI inflation which reached 14.2 percent in the year to October.

Workers at Menzies have suffered the same experience as many of their colleagues in aviation worldwide. More than half were placed on furlough in 2020. When passenger levels began to increase again this year they worked through the stressful conditions and were exposed to COVID-19 in understaffed airports. The company now insists more sacrifices are required.

Air Cargo News reported Menzies' claim that workers' demands pay rise in line with inflation are "irresponsible" and "would undoubtedly impact our business' ability to operate in the best interest of our workforce in the long term." Both claims, that a decent pay rise is unaffordable, and that the company wants to act in the best interest of the workforce, are absurd.

Unite pointed to the tens of millions of pounds in profits made by Menzies. While the company wants workers to believe the company is teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, Menzies' chief executive, speaking on the takeover by Kuwait-based NAS, quoted by *Insider*, said "our fuel and ground services businesses go from strength to strength."

He added that "as a result of significant management action to reduce costs, we expect that [business] growth will be achieved while delivering structurally higher margins."

That is, the shareholders' will be handed greater profit margins while the "cost" of paying the workers who create value through their labour will be reduced.

These problems are not unique to one section of Menzies' employees, to members of one union, or even to one company or one airport, but are shared by workers across the globe. But Menzies ground handling workers have found themselves isolated along all these lines by Unite and other unions.

Reacting to Unite's rejection of its below-inflation offer, Menzies described its offer as "the deal we have agreed with GMB", the union representing most of the handling workers, according to *Air Cargo News.* But Unite itself has done as much as the GMB to isolate the striking workers.

At the start of November Unite announced 700 workers at Dnata and Menzies in Heathrow would be striking on November 18, but by the time workers walked out this had already been cut by half, as ground handling workers at Dnata had accepted "an improved offer."

Unite even suspended the strike of Menzies employees in the cargo and trucking sections of its business, calling a ballot on "a significantly improved offer"effectively calling on colleagues from the same company to cross the ground handling workers' picket lines. This exposes the dishonest rhetoric of Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham, who recently told the Trades Union Congress annual conference, "We must now begin on the road to real industrial co-ordination. Across employers. Across industries. Focussing on jobs, pay and conditions."

The Labour Research Department's Payline database in fact lists four separate deals for groups of Menzies workers at Heathrow alone, with workers doing the same job at the airport split between at least five employers listed on Heathrow's website. An array of complex structures are used as part of a strategy of divide and conquer, such as the "joint ventures" between Menzies and other companies at the airport.

Using this division of the workforce, while workers employed jointly by Menzies, Shell and ExxonMobil

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received a 6 percent wage increase and an additional unconsolidated £3,000 lump sum for 2022, Menzies BA refuelling workers had no wage rise at all, only getting the lump sum.

This legalistic division, which enables the unions to insist that united action is illegal, must be challenged if workers are to have any chance of defending their living conditions. Airport workers have the power to paralyse an important part of the economy when united, but the employers are confident they can get away with increasing profits at workers' expense because of the decades in which no more than a small fraction of the workforce walks out together.

The divisions artificially imposed by the combined efforts of the employers and unions must be challenged as workers at airports and airlines around the world fight to reverse cuts to pay and conditions imposed at the start of the pandemic. Menzies workers, and other workers in the airline industry, will find a powerful response to a call for unity with the millions now entering into a struggle.

The Sunak government has made an open declaration of war on the working class, with a renewed and escalated attack on living conditions through its autumn budget, and a raft of anti-strike laws aimed at curtailing the growing movement of the working class. Striking rail workers have been slandered as "Putin's stooges" and "the enemy underground." The government continues to recklessly escalate the conflict with Russia in Ukraine, risking a third world war.

To defeat this reactionary agenda and overcome the divisive manoeuvrers of the unions, the *World Socialist Web Site* calls on workers at Heathrow and other airports to build rank-and-file committees in their workplace, which can actively campaign for unity across job roles, companies, and appeal to colleagues at airports around the globe.

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