1,300 workers strike North Sea oil and gas companies

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Around 1,300 North Sea oil workers held a 48-hour strike Monday and Tuesday with operations halted at dozens of oil and gas platforms. The workers are demanding better pay and working conditions.

The strike was called by the Unite union, with workers across various trades involved at Bilfinger UK Limited, Petrofac Facilities Management, Stork Technical Services, Sparrows Offshore Services, and Worley Services UK Limited. They included electrical, production and mechanical technicians in addition to deck crew, scaffolders, crane operators, pipefitters, platers, and riggers.

Among the major corporations hit were BP, CNRI, EnQuest, Harbour Energy, Ithaca, Shell and Total.

Most of the workers were striking Bilfinger UK Limited, with Unite stating that 700 workers are demanding "an increase above the base rate of pay set in the Energy Services Agreement (ESA) for 2022." According to the Offshore-Energy web site, that action alone could have resulted "in 40 offshore installations being hit." It added, "Last year, the ESA agreed to a 4 per cent uplift, which was meant to be paid in January 2023, but the union claims that this has not been paid to date."

Unite's press release on the strikes gives no indication of what wage increase it is calling for, under conditions in which RPI inflation at almost 14 percent is nearly 10 percent higher than the Energy Services Agreement rate. The pay of workers at the company has been hit even harder with the Offshore-Energy web site reporting, "Unite claims that Bilfinger has not implemented any pay awards and allowance uplifts that were also agreed in November 2022."

The other main group of strikers are 350 construction workers at Stork. They are in a dispute, Unite said, "over working rotas and rates of pay." The rotas in question are the widely despised three weeks on/three weeks off, utilised by the oil industry corporations to cut costs.

Fifty Unite members struck at Petrofac Facilities Management Limited on the FPF1 platform in a dispute over holiday entitlements. "Offshore workers can be asked to work at any time for no additional payment. The operator, Ithaca Energy, has a 'clawback' policy of 14 days, double the industry norm of 7 days," said Unite. The Petrofac workers voted by a 95.5 percent on a turnout of 73.4 percent to strike. In the other dispute, 80 workers employed by Wood Group UK Limited on TAQA platforms are fighting a 10 percent cut made to salaries, *as long ago as 2015*, resulting in them losing around £7,000 a year, according to Unite.

Unite are not making any concrete demands to mobilise workers throughout the industry, in which the main players are making staggering profits. The union's own press release points to a situation where just two of the oil conglomerates, BP (£23 billion) and Shell (£32 billion), saw profits surge to £55 billion in 2022.

Unite described the 48-hour action as the "biggest offshore stoppage in a generation" on Monday. The reality is that the union refuses to mobilize its full membership in the North Sea to oppose the reaping of mass profits by the corporations at the expense of workers' pay, conditions and jobs. This week's press release by the union acknowledged there were "strike mandates at Petrofac BP covering around 100 members, and over 80 members employed by the Wood Group on TAQA assets," but, "No strike dates have been announced in relation to these disputes. Unite also has a further strike mandate at Worley Services UK Limited involving 50 members but action has been suspended while talks continue with the company."

Other workers in critical areas of Unite’s UK Continental Shelf membership are still waiting for the union to conclude an industrial action ballot. The union said this week, “70 offshore workers employed by TotalEnergies on the Elgin Franklin and North Alwyn platforms along with the Shetland Gas Plant are being balloted on strike action. The ballots close on 5 May.”

Industry specialist news site *Energy Voice* (EV) cited Unite regional officer Shauna Wright, who said in the vaguest terms, “The goal here is to highlight the plight that this is now an 11-month-old industrial question and we’re looking for a permanent increase.

“We’ve asked Bilfinger to come back around the table, three of their clients (TAQA CNR and Ithaca) came across with an offer three weeks ago, it was put to our members, and it was strongly rejected by all three of those groups.

“Six and seven per cent is not going to cut it, we’re saying that our members deserve more.”

What will cut it for the union bureaucracy—as demonstrated in a host of national strikes they have already sold out or are in the process of doing so, including in the postal and rail disputes—is to secure a further tiny increase, but still well below inflation, in pay, or maybe a paltry one-off lump sum, they can attempt to palm off as a victory.

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham, since taking over in August 2021 from the discredited Len McCluskey, has specialised in promoting below-inflation deals as bumper victories. Among many sell-outs were those of bus drivers at Go North West buses and Abellio London and of refuse bin drivers at Coventry City Council. For this record and for the ability of her PR machine to present rotten deals as breathtaking advances for workers, Graham has been constantly hailed by the corporate media.

Ever alert to signals to workers struggles that threaten to escalate out of their control, Unite has organised the North Sea strikes, and threatened more if the disputes are not resolved, in response to the outbreak of wildcat action on the oil and gas rigs as recently as last September. That action hit operations of at least 17 North Sea installations with hundreds of workers taking part. It was part of a spate of unofficial action including a stoppage in May last year, sparked by what *Energy Voice* described as the outcome of demands to increase pay in a “wage revolution.”

Organising those stoppages were the Offshore Oil and Gas Workers Strike Committee, which denounced the ESA and criticised the unions for years of inaction. This was why the wildcats erupted in the face of bitter opposition by the pro-business unions in the sector, Unite, the RMT and the GMB, who described the action of the workers involved as a 'smash and grab” operation, for “short term gain” and leading to “division.”

When Graham, in announcing this week’s strikes in March, warned that they could be the start of a “tsunami of industrial unrest” if workers grievances weren’t met, this was the threat uppermost in the calculations of the bureaucracy.

Workers in the North Sea, offshore and onshore, must take their struggles out of the hands of Unite and the other unions through the development of their own rank-and-file committees. These would ensure the mobilisation of all workers in the sector, reaching out to oil and gas workers across the world to mobilise their collective strength against the global energy corporations in defence of their living standards.