

Valentine's Day strike against Deliveroo, Uber Eats, Just Eats and Stuart to fight poverty pay

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Thousands of delivery drivers in the UK and Ireland staged a five-hour strike Wednesday, demanding better pay and conditions across four of the largest online food delivery platforms: Deliveroo, Uber Eats, Just Eats and Stuart.

The action by riders lasted from 5pm until 10pm, coinciding with peak Valentine's Day trade, one of the busiest food delivery days of the year. It was co-ordinated through a recently formed grass roots courier campaign "Delivery Job UK". An earlier round of strikes called by the group on February 2, involved 3,000 riders in London, Brighton, Liverpool and Glasgow.

Videos shared on social media yesterday showed large motorcades of striking riders in Brighton and across London, including hundreds of riders circling Parliament. Pickets were held in the West Midlands and a protest was staged by strikers in Dublin, Ireland. The action coincided with a planned two-hour strike in the US by drivers for Uber, Lyft and food delivery companies, organised by Justice for App Workers which claims a membership of 130,000 app drivers.

The walkouts and protests have been galvanised through social media accounts set-up by Delivery Job UK on X, Instagram and WhatsApp, giving the spontaneous eruption of opposition an organised character.

Publicity ahead of the action was headlined, "Exploitation on Two Wheels: Unveiling the Plight of UK delivery riders".

It explained, "In the United Kingdom, the gig economy's dark underbelly is starkly exposed through the plight of delivery riders. Tasked with servicing giants like Deliveroo, Uber Eats, Stuart, and Just Eat, these workers grapple with the harsh realities of rising living costs, juxtaposed against the backdrop of inadequate compensation and recognition.

"A significant portion of these riders, many of whom are immigrants or primary family breadwinners, endure gruelling shifts extending beyond 13 hours daily, without a day's rest..."

A spokesperson for Delivery Job UK told *Brave New Europe* how the strike movement began with riders in Battersea, south London planning action at a single "dark kitchen", but it expanded rapidly via three WhatsApp groups encompassing around 1,000 workers each, mainly Brazilian and Portuguese

nationals. Under the alias "Rafael", he explained, "We also now have another group with more than 1,000 people of English speakers with different nationalities: Algerians, Albanians, Romanians, Indians, people from all over the world." He said the network had since spread to Bristol, Brighton, Peterborough and to a new group in Dublin, Ireland.

Rafael explained how the stoppages had cut across divisions of language and culture, establishing the drivers' class unity: "One of the funny things is that there was a lot of disbelief between the different nationalities: so the Indians were saying 'the Brazilians won't stop', the Brazilians were saying 'the Indians won't stop', and the Algerians were saying 'I don't believe the Brazilians or the Indians will stop'. And in the end, everyone stopped together!"

The riders used AI technology to translate their call for solidarity into 15 languages. This practical expression of the international character and unity of the working class shows the potential to challenge the giant global delivery companies who use the casualised and insecure nature of the work to divide and rule, driving down pay and increasing exploitation.

Dr. Callum Cant, a Senior Lecturer in Management from University of Essex who is an expert on the gig economy, told the BBC that fees paid for deliveries had dropped in real terms by 40 percent since 2018, "With a minimum fee of £2.80, most might only be making three orders an hour, and then they have to subtract their costs too. Some are making £7 an hour, which in London is barely liveable."

An hourly rate of £7 is well below the National Minimum Wage (rebranded as the National Living Wage) which stands at £10.42 per hour for those 23 years of age. In April, this rate will rise to £11.44 per hour and will apply to workers 21 years and over, meaning delivery riders will fall further behind even this meagre protection.

The delivery companies get around their statutory requirements by treating riders as self-employed. The immediate demand of the strike is for £5 per delivery across all apps and a £2 supplement for every mile after the first. As one rider said in a video appeal for the strike: "We were warriors during the pandemic, weren't we? We saved this city, the

heroes. Today we are treated as dogs.”

Gig economy platforms are not simply an “underbelly”, the number of working age adults relying on this form of employment has increased from 5.8 percent in 2016 to 14.7 percent in 2021 in England and Wales.

Riders at the four main delivery app companies have made a decisive stand. They should resist all attempts to divert their struggle into dead-end appeals to the political establishment, legal system or the pro-company trade unions. Bitter experience has shown this is a dead end.

The Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) which organises among gig economy workers has championed this failed approach. It was caught unaware by the latest strike outbreak by riders, with a belated statement of support for the Valentine’s Day action.

The IWGB’s protracted legal campaign for Deliveroo riders to be recognised as “workers” with collective bargaining rights, culminated in defeat at the Supreme Court last November. The highest court in the UK upheld all former legal judgements stretching back to 2017, ruling that couriers were self-employed because they could arrange a substitute to perform their duties.

In its legal defence, Deliveroo cited the union recognition agreement it struck with the GMB union in May 2022. The GMB—the third largest trade union in the UK—secured deal to be recognised as the sole union covering Deliveroo’s 90,000 riders nationally via a “Voluntary Partnership Agreement”. This trampled on workers’ core demands for a minimum hourly wage and payment for time spent at work once logged into the app, rather than solely for time receiving and delivering orders. The GMB expressly accepted workers being designated as self-employed. It has sought to justify its exploitative “partners” model at Deliveroo based on negligible concessions including sick pay for two weeks, a one-off grant for new partners of £1,000, and accident and third-party insurance.

The “voluntary agreement” imposed over the heads of Deliveroo workers was hailed as the “first of its kind in the world” by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and “groundbreaking” by the Labour Party. This exposes their professed concern over the exploitation of gig economy workers as hypocritical. “The partnership of Deliveroo and the GMB has been used by the company in an attempted bid to crack down on the strike action as it emailed all riders ahead of Wednesday’s stoppage with a GMB statement claiming it was “their union” as it pursues back room talks, “We are meeting company management regularly and have made progress.”

The Valentine’s Day action coincided with the latest strikes to hit Amazon at its BHX4 warehouse in Coventry in the West Midlands by around 1,000 members of GMB, where the union has presented itself as waging a pioneering fight. Three days of consecutive strike action this week from Tuesday followed 30 days of stoppages spread across last year, with warehouse workers demanding an hourly increase to £15. The company only increased the top starting rate last year to £12.50 an hour

with an incremental increase to £13 an hour from this April.

“GMB’s intervention at Amazon was aimed at heading-off the eruption of militancy in August 2022 through walkouts and sit-ins against a derisory pay award. Their wildcat action spread across at least 10 fulfilment centres nationally, demonstrating the potential for a company-wide fight.”

The GMB’s first official strike action at Amazon, by contrast, has been deliberately staggered. It is mainly confined to the Coventry warehouse, with a couple of days strike action at the Rugeley site last year, and a one-day stoppage on January 25 at the new fulfilment centre in Birmingham. The GMB’s industrial straitjacket is part of efforts to win the approval of Amazon and establish the same type of corporate partnership it has established at Deliveroo.

Amanda Gearing, GMB regional organiser, spelt this out, declaring: “If Amazon wants to keep its empire running, it needs to get around the table with the GMB to improve the pay and conditions of workers.” This is a commitment to subdue a million-strong global workforce, blocking any challenge to billionaire founder Jeff Bezos and the major shareholders who reap massive rewards from the company’s sweatshop regime.

Workers at Amazon, Deliveroo, Uber Eats, Just Eats and Stuart, should expand and unify their struggles through the building of rank-and-file committees acting independently of the trade union bureaucracy. The trade union leaders presided over a betrayal of last year’s strike wave, cutting one below inflation pay deal after another, and preventing a movement which could have toppled the Tory government. The union bureaucracy lined up with Starmer’s Labour Party which is running for government on an agenda of austerity and war.

Delivery drivers and Amazon workers: Make your voice heard! Tell us about your pay and working conditions.



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