

Unite union calls off UK strike action at global arms corporation Leonardo

Robert Stevens
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On Tuesday, the Unite union suspended strikes scheduled to take place the following day of 3,000 aerospace workers employed by weapons manufacturer Leonardo in Britain. The workers were set to walk out in a pay dispute at five of the company's nine UK plants. These are in Yeovil, Luton, Basildon, Edinburgh and Newcastle.

The workers were offered a pay deal of just 3.2 percent from the employer and all the "sites returned ballots overwhelmingly in favour of taking strike action". The CPI rate of inflation is at 4 percent, RPI at 4.5 percent.

The workers were to strike on November 5-6 and November 12-13 at Yeovil, Luton, Basildon, Edinburgh and Newcastle. From November 10-18 a longer strike was set for the Edinburgh and Newcastle plants.

In a statement of just 179 words, Unite cancelled action on the 5th and 6th. Unite national officer Rhys McCarthy said in the statement, "As an act of good faith, Unite has suspended tomorrow's strike action to allow a ballot of our members to take place. The threat of action has brought Leonardo back to the table with a new and improved offer and we will now consult our members." No details were provided as to how the offer is improved.

Keeping production running and profits flowing is part and parcel of the union bureaucracy's operations in any case, but Leonardo's place in British imperialism's war machine made this an even greater imperative for Unite's leadership.

The company is the 12th largest global arms manufacturer, producing helicopters, aircraft, aerospace parts, electronics and cybersecurity products at its 129 sites worldwide, employing over 60,000 workers. It has played a critical role in arming the Israeli regime's genocide against the Palestinians.

At its Edinburgh factory, Leonardo manufactures parts for Apache helicopters and makes components used in the laser targeting systems for F-35 fighter jets. This has seen

the plant repeatedly targeted by anti-war activists over the course of the past two years.

A valuable study of the company by the Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) group cited analysis by Project Ploughshares who, "traced the global supply chain for Israel's F-35 fleet" and established that "Leonardo's grants for its work on Israel's F-35 fleet totalled over US\$ 3 billion."

How critical Leonardo is to the UK's own war machine is clear in (CAAT) analysis noting that it "was awarded a 10-year UK Ministry of Defence contract to supply, develop and future proof the tools which generate and analyse data used by the UK Armed Forces' combat aircraft... In Bristol, Leonardo's has a UK Cyber and Security team of 150 that develops cybersecurity defences for critical national infrastructure."

The company "is a significant supplier to the UK Ministry of Defence, primarily in helicopters and defence electronics. Its UK revenues total UK £ 2.5 billion, around 37% of which are from exports."

Leonardo's plant in Yeovil, Somerset is the UK's only end-to-end rotary wing manufacturer, producing the AW149 helicopter and providing "Integrated Operational Support for the Merlin AW101 and Wildcat AW159." Countries using the AW149 include Egypt, whose navy ordered 24 units starting in 2020, and Poland whose Army has ordered 32 helicopters to be delivered by 2029.

Highlighting Labour's militarist agenda, Leonardo sponsored an event at the party's 2021 annual conference hosted by the Labour Friends of the Forces Group (LFF) which boasts that "Labour's history is heavily entwined with that of our armed forces." In attendance was the current defence secretary John Healey.

As the Labour and all governments of the imperialist powers have drastically raised military spending, and committed to further increases, Leonardo's profits have shot up. In 2024, the company brought in revenue of

almost €18 billion, racking up profits of over €1.5 billion.

More is on the way. The Starmer government alone has committed the UK to doubling military and national security spending from 2.5 to 5 percent of GDP by 2035. It is expected that Leonardo's AW149 will win the contract to be Britain's New Medium Helicopter, with a deal for up to 44 of the helicopters set to be announced in the next weeks. Leonardo is also developing Proteus—a helicopter-like autonomous large drone—for the Royal Navy.

Unite was content to let these profits flow to Leonardo's executives and shareholders, sitting on the strike vote for two weeks before announcing dates on October 24 and now pulling the plug at the last moment for an undisclosed new offer.

The union leadership is committed to upholding both the profit interests of British corporations and the strategic interests of British imperialism. It has played a pivotal role in clamping down on anti-war sentiment among its members.

In March 2024, an email surfaced in which Graham denounced campaigns “that actively work against our members and their jobs... groups that look to build networks inside trade unions to undermine the defence industry or demand the disbandment of NATO and AUKUS [the Australian, British and US military alliance against China].”

Earlier this year, Graham hailed Starmer's commitment to increased defence spending, adding that it “needs to be matched with action” and based on a “Buy British” agenda. She made a particular plea for “British made Typhoons” over “US made F35s”.

Underscoring Unite's close relationship with Leonardo, these remarks were made at a February 26 lobby of parliament organised by the union, demanding the government purchase Typhoon fighter jets and sign a contract for a new medium-lift army and RAF helicopter to be produced by Leonardo in Yeovil.

Under pressure from rank-and-file workers appalled at the genocide in Gaza, Unite's Policy Conference in August felt forced to pass a motion in favour of a workers' boycott of arms supplies to Israel.

The *World Socialist Web Site* noted, however:

staggering hypocrisy runs through the statement, which avoids any direct reference to the UK-based arms firms enabling these war crimes—especially BAE Systems, which provides 15 percent of the

components for the F-35 fighter jets dropping 2,000lb bombs on Gaza. There is no mention of any specific Unite-organised workplaces involved in the manufacture or shipment of weapons.

The WSWs concluded, “This is a containment exercise, meant to defuse rank-and-file anger while preserving Unite's cosy ties with arms manufacturers and the Labour government.”

This has been fully confirmed by events at Leonardo, where neither the July resolution nor the vote of members against their impoverishment has prevented the bureaucracy from sabotaging a struggle.

Announcing the ballots on October 8 mandating strikes, Graham said:, “Our members are highly skilled and work on critical defence and aerospace systems yet are being short-changed by a company making billions. Leonardo needs to do the right thing”.

The union then allowed a further 10 days to elapse, giving Leonardo time to prepare either for limited industrial action—with Unite having ensured that it would be sporadic and not impact all factories at once—or to come up with another pay deal as a pretext for Unite cancelling action.

On the basis of last minute talks, Unite has stood workers down in “good faith” and prevented industrial action at a company which plays a major role in the military operations of the imperialist powers and other repressive regimes.

The WSWs urges workers to come forward with details of the pay deal and any strings attached. Contact us below.



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