

UK Leonardo and BAE Systems workers strike for pay rise

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16 November 2025

More than 3,000 aerospace workers at weapons manufacturer Leonardo struck Wednesday and Thursday after rejecting a revised pay offer. The Unite members struck at sites in Yeovil, Luton, Basildon, Newcastle and Edinburgh. Further strikes are being held to November 28.

The strikes went ahead eight days after Unite called off action, just hours before an initial round of strikes were to go ahead from November 5. Workers were originally offered a pay deal of just 3.2 percent from Leonardo, a company raking in huge profits—with the CPI rate of inflation at 4 percent and RPI at 4.5 percent.

Unite gave no details at the time of the “improved offer” under which it tried to end the dispute. It was no such thing, as Leonardo workers proved in rejecting it. The initial pay offer was for just 3.2 percent for Year 1 and 3 percent for Year 2 with a potential RPI trigger to 4 percent (below where RPI is at now!). The second offer was just 3.6 percent for Year 1 and 3.75 percent for Year 2. This equates to a pay deal of under 3.7 percent for each year, well below rising inflation.

As action began this week, Unite had to backtrack declaring that the latest offer was not improved at all. Its press release stated, “Both offers are below the RPI rate of inflation which is running at 4.5 per cent and therefore represent a real-terms pay cut for workers.” It called for Leonardo to return “to the negotiating table” and make “a further revised offer that is acceptable to staff in the midst of the current cost-of-living crisis.”

Unite’s failure to end industrial action with a shoddy deal meant it was forced to announce a new round of industrial action. As with the original planned action, this does not consist of a unified strike at all five plants but is being held sporadically involving one or two plants at a time. The only strikes to be held at all five sites are the two days this week. Other action is planned for Edinburgh and Basildon on November 14-18, 19-20, 21-23 and

24-25. A solitary strike will be held by workers in Yeovil—location of Leonardo’s helicopter manufacturing plant—on November 25-28.

Leonardo is seeking to preserve its position as one of the largest global arms manufacturer and over €1.5 billion euros profits on revenues of nearly €18 billion. The company produces helicopters, aircraft, aerospace parts, electronics and cybersecurity products at its 129 sites worldwide and employs over 60,000 workers.

In a press release Unite national officer for aerospace Rhys McCarthy said: “Leonardo will now see the anger of its workers on the picket line outside its factories... The company needs to come back to the negotiating table with a proper offer our members can accept.”

In the knowledge of Unite’s long record of ending token strikes with sellout deals of their members, Leonardo responded, “We welcome Unite back to the negotiating table in a bid to reach a resolution.”

Unite played a central role in ensuring that workers employed by arms companies in the UK were not mobilised against the Starmer government’s complicity in Israel’s genocide in Gaza—in which Leonardo have played a key role. Leonardo’s Edinburgh factory manufactures parts for Apache helicopters and components used in the laser targeting systems for F-35 fighter jets, with the plant repeatedly targeted by anti-war activists.

Leonardo’s helicopter manufacturing facility is vital to its revenues and profits. In a July 2024 press release, Leonardo noted of Yeovil, “Since 2013, Leonardo has generated almost £6.8 billion in helicopter exports from the UK to customers across North America, Asia-Pacific, Europe, and North Africa. This includes over £500 million of export sales in 2023.”

Shoring up future profits from the Starmer government in defence contracts is a central issue for Leonardo and is being weaponised in the current dispute.

Last summer Leonardo submitted a bid for a £1 billion

contract from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) for its AW149 helicopter to replace the Pumas used for decades by the Royal Air Force. Despite reportedly being the sole contender, Leonardo said this month it was still awaiting a final decision.

The *Financial Times* reported Leonardo head Roberto Cingolani during an investor conference call this month saying, “We cannot subsidise Yeovil forever—it’s 14 years that we don’t get any contracts from the UK government.” If the UK contract was not won, Leonardo “should consider why we keep a plant there [Yeovil] for 15 years and don’t get anything.” He warned, “This is part of our efficiency plan—should things not work properly.” The FT noted, “The warning is the clearest yet by Leonardo—which is helping to develop a next-generation fighter jet under the Global Combat Air Programme—that the site’s future depends on the company securing the contract from the MoD.”

Unite openly declares a “Buy British” agenda and seeks to dragoon its members behind a cross-class campaign claiming that workers in the arms industry have the same interests as the firms that employ them. South West Regional Officer for Unite Shevaun Hunt told the BBC, “The strike isn’t going to impact the government’s decision [on a new helicopter contract] but our message is very clear to the government—Yeovil is the home of British helicopters.”

This corporatism chimes perfectly with Leonardo’s boast that it is the “only company ... in the New Medium Helicopter competition that has the skills and infrastructure onshore to provide a ‘Made in Britain’ helicopter to the UK Armed Forces.”

Unite has tens of thousands of members who are employed by the arms manufacturers and their supply chain and is working overtime to ensure there is no joint offensive against them. Britain’s largest arms company, BAE Systems, is seeking to hold down pay, offering just a 3.6 percent rise in September. This after BAE Systems raked in over £5.7 billion in profits over the past two years, with shareholders in line to receive £1.5 billion in dividends this year.

The real-terms pay cut was overwhelmingly rejected by 5,200 members, including aerospace engineers, quality control workers and other professionals, balloted by Unite at the company’s Warton and Samlesbury sites in Lancashire. Unite was clear what it was prepared to accept to end the dispute, stating that it was “below a pay offer made and accepted by BAE Systems shop floor colleagues, who received 4.5 per cent [current RPI rate]

and an additional day of annual leave.”

With the company refusing to concede anything, Unite called a series of strikes from November 5 to November 25. On November 3, BAE Systems took legal action at the High Court seeking an injunction to prevent the scheduled strikes but was too late to prevent the first day of action going ahead.

On November 6, a High Court judge refuses to grant the injunction to BAE Systems. In response the company went on the offensive imposing a pay offer already thrown out by Unite’s members. Last week Unite announced, while pleading to the company to come to an agreement on pay, further strikes from November 26 to December 17. Again, this would not be an all-out strike with action “dependent on exact worker designation and shift patterns.”

Unite’s action is designed to do the least economic damage possible to a company it has maintained the cosiest relations with, under conditions in which it provides 15 percent of the components for F-35 fighter jets dropping 2,000lb bombs on Gaza.

The token action at BAE Systems confirms the pro-forma nature of the motion the bureaucracy allowed to pass at Unite’s Policy Conference in August, as anger mounted among workers at the Starmer government’s complicity in Israel’s genocide in Gaza. Presented by the United Left faction as backing a workers’ boycott of arms supplies to Israel, the motion avoided any direct reference to the UK-based arms firms enabling these war crimes—especially BAE Systems. No mention was made of targeting any specific Unite-organised workplaces involved in the manufacture or shipment of weapons.

Leonardo and BAE Systems workers cannot leave their struggle in the hands of the union bureaucracy. Rank and file committees, acting outside the control of the union bureaucrats, would be able to make contact with other workers in key industries—including port workers throughout Europe—to stop the flow of British arms to Israel and defeat the Starmer government’s complicity in the genocide.



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