

UK National Coal Mining Museum management issues disciplinary threats against strikers

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Striking workers at the National Coal Mining Museum for England (NCMME) in Wakefield, Yorkshire have rejected a revised offer from management which threatened them with investigation and disciplinary action when they return to work. The strikers are members of the Unison trade union which that for many workers the package was “worse than one presented to staff that prompted the walkouts”.

More than 40 museum workers, most of them underground mine guides, have been on strike for five months since August 20 battling low pay. The mine guides, many of whom are former miners including veterans of the 1984-5 strike are on £12.86 while other staff are on £12.60 per hour. These rates sank closer to the national minimum wage in April last year of £12.21 per hour for workers 21 and over.

According to Unison, the latest proposal—the details of which have not been disclosed—contains a clause stating that “the museum will investigate staff and discipline them when they return to work.” Workers responded by overwhelmingly rejecting the offer.

Unison Yorkshire and Humberside regional organiser, Rianne Hooley stated: “This farcical offer is the latest in a series of sorry missteps by managers that have only prolonged the dispute through their poor judgement and incompetence.”

Threatening disciplinary action against workers rejecting a derisory pay offer is no error of judgement or joke; it is a calculated attempt to intimidate and sets a far wider precedent.

Unison’s minimising of management’s coercive methods is to justify their continued isolation of the dispute. The blocking of any genuine solidarity action is based on bankrupt appeals to management goodwill, trustees and local politicians. Labour Party Wakefield Council leader Denise Jeffery told a rally in December she had met with the chief executive of the museum to get around the table to resolve the dispute stating: “We’re talking peanuts to fix this. But I have a real fear they don’t want to do that.”

The strike action was triggered after an original offer of 5 percent was rejected in March. Unison recommended a 5 percent rise or £1 for all staff which ever was higher. But even this miserly sum was rejected by management who came back—a week before the walkout was due to start—with 5 percent or 80p. In October, it withdrew the 80p offer entirely and replaced it with an offer of just 62p per hour.

Hooley’s comments are designed to reassure workers that the dispute can still be resolved within the current framework. Yet all evidence is that management is not negotiating but engaging in a blatant attempt to isolate and break a small but determined group of workers who voted earlier this month to extend the strike for a third time by a 92 percent majority until June.

The museum holds reserves of around £10 million and recorded an operating surplus of over £500,000 according to Unison. The pay gap between the lowest-paid worker and the highest-paid executive exceeds £120,000. Unison estimates that settling the dispute would cost an estimated £150,000 and is entirely “affordable”: based on its committee to ensure an operating surplus of £400,000. Management response has been to funnel £100,000 to hire private security guards to harass the pickets.

The museum remains partially open, but underground tours—its main attraction—and the pit railway are suspended due to the absence of trained guides. The NCMME is a registered charity governed by a board of trustees overseeing multiple funding streams, of which Wakefield Council is only one.

Located at the former Caphouse (Overton) Colliery, the site was worked from the 18th century until its closure in 1985. It reopened as the Yorkshire Mining Museum in 1988 and gained national status in 1995. The museum’s underground tours, reaching depths of 140 metres, offer visitors insight into the brutal conditions of coal mining and are uniquely guided by former miners sharing first-hand experience. Its library and archive include a first edition of

Georgius Agricola's *De re Metallica* (*On the Nature of Metals* [Minerals]) who among many other things stipulated that a miner should have a knowledge of philosophy, medicine, astronomy, surveying, arithmetic, architecture, drawing and law.

The dispute at the museum has led to posturing by the Labour Party over “mining heritage”: a fig leaf to mask the social devastation caused by the closure of all remaining 170 pits employing almost 190,000 since the strike. Today there are no deep mine coals in Britain after the closure of Kellingley colliery in December 2015.

The so-called “regeneration” projects overseen by Labour councils in areas such as Yorkshire have involved using the resulting unemployment to lure inward investment on the prospect of the supply of low wages. This has produced new legions of workers in insecure low paid jobs in the service sector and in workplaces such as warehouses run by retail and logistics firms like Amazon and ASOS. The antics of NCMME shows that the industrial heritage of the area is no less exploited for profit.

The fact that Labour controlled Wakefield Council presented its decision in September to withhold grant funding from the museum as an act of “solidarity” goes to the heart of the fraud. This was a convenient action by an authority making sweeping cuts and slashing council staff jobs while hiking up regressive taxation, raising council tax to the maximum to make the working class pay for its £23.4 million deficit.

The real significance of the 1984–85 miners’ strike lies in the contemporary fight against those who co-authored the defeat of the heroic year-long struggle against Thatcher’s state orchestrated attacks – the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. They had already embraced the pro-market restructuring which has paved the way for the looting of the economy and unprecedented levels of social inequality, as union leaders used anti-strike legislation to police their own members. The *World Socialist Web Site* marked the 40th Anniversary of the 1984-5 strike with an assessment containing invaluable lessons for the class struggle today.

This addressed the 2022-4 nationwide strike wave with 5 million working days lost, triggered by the cost-of-living crisis and the ruthless sacrifice of health to private profit in the COVID pandemic which developed as part of the emergence of working class struggle internationally. But Unison along with the entire union bureaucracy demobilised this based on one sellout after another to help put in power a Starmer government to the right of Blair and any Labour predecessor in history and serves as a direct tool of big business and austerity.

In Birmingham a year- long strike by refuse workers—which started over opposition to drastic pay cuts and job

losses imposed by a Labour council implementing £300 million of cuts—witnessed the Starmer government sanction every conceivable form of strike breaking and now fire and rehire against a small but combative section of 400 workers.

The domination of the bureaucracy has resulted in hollowed out tusk where a labour movement should be, underscoring the need for its reconstruction based on rank-and-file organisation and a perspective based on waging an implacable fight against the employers and big business.

The recent election of “left” Andrea Egan as Unison General Secretary in December epitomises this with an overall turnout of just 7 percent in the vote. The best Egan could muster after expulsion from the Labour Party in 2022 is a platform to “get more value for money” from Unison’s bankrolling of Labour. This is an alibi for continued co-operation with the Starmer government enforcing real term pay cuts across the public sector, the slashing of services and privatisation of the NHS. Egan offers only a bit more of the same claiming that the union’s “Organising to Win” strategy, has “started to put money in the pockets of our members” flatly refuted by the below inflation offers it has helped to enforce across the public sector.p

The five-month isolation of Unison members at the coal mining museum highlights a broader imperative: to remove the dead hand of the union bureaucracy that has blocked resistance across councils, the NHS, and other workplaces. This would unleash workers’ collective strength in a genuine fight that draws together all confronting austerity, irrespective of sector, profession, or employer.

This will not come from Unison officials. To realise this worker’s need to form rank and file committees to fan out to their genuine allies against Labour and every other section of the political establishment.

A starting point for this is opposing Unison’s attempt to downplay the gravity of threats made by the employers at the mining museum. The basic principle of “an injury to one is an injury” must instead be asserted by workers themselves to establish genuine solidarity action to assist them in a push back against such dictatorial methods and will contribute to the necessary development of a far wider fightback.



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