

Construction workers at Hinkley Point C nuclear plant locked out after safety protest

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8 June 2026

Hundreds of workers at the under construction Hinkley Point C nuclear power plant site in Somerset, south-west England were locked out and had their wages docked after staging a protest over safety concerns and working conditions last week.

The dispute at one of the largest construction projects in Europe with around 14,000 workers on site has been subjected to a near-total blackout by the national media. Information about the action has emerged primarily through *Construction Inquirer* after workers involved in the protest contacted the publication directly.

According to the report, workers employed by the MEH Alliance consortium staged a canteen sit-in to protest an unsafe clocking-out procedure requiring workers to leave the site through a crane lift zone. Workers also rejected new shift patterns, raising concerns over fatigue and safety.

The protest began last Tuesday (June 2). Workers involved were ordered off the site until this Monday, with their wages docked. The lockout was reinforced by a major police presence the next day with photographs shared by workers showing a cordon of police vehicles stationed around the site.

Rather than addressing the concerns raised by workers, management responded by effectively criminalising the protest.

One worker told *Construction Inquirer*, “Hundreds of safety-conscious nuclear construction workers have been locked out without pay for raising legitimate hazard and fatigue concerns.”

The deployment of police underscores the increasingly authoritarian response of the Starmer Labour government and the employers to workers seeking to defend their basic rights.

A spokesperson for Hinkley Point C said:

“We have experienced unofficial industrial action being taken by members of the MEH workforce. There are well established processes with trade unions to resolve any workplace concerns and unofficial action is not acceptable. As a result, MEH workers have been told not to return to site until Monday. Other construction workers continue to work as normal across the site.

“Along with our trades union partners and MEH management team we encourage a return to following the agreed processes.”

The significance of this statement lies not only in its condemnation of workers taking independent action, but in its open reference to management’s partnership with the trade

unions.

The main issue for Hinkley Point C management and MEH Alliance was not that workers had raised concerns about safety. It was that they had done so outside the framework jointly controlled by management and the union bureaucracy.

The invocation of “established processes” exposes the corporatist arrangements that now dominate industrial relations. Workers are expected to channel all grievances through procedures designed to prevent collective action and maintain uninterrupted production. When workers act independently, they are treated as a threat.

The unions representing MDH Alliance workers—the GMB and Unite—have issued no public statements in defence of workers who have been locked out and deprived of pay. Neither has publicly challenged management’s actions or the mounting of a police operation against workers protesting safety concerns. Representatives of both unions effectively disassociated themselves from their members action with hand wringing comments. Charlotte Brumpton-Childs, GMB national secretary, said the union was working to resolve the issues... “When work recommences on Monday, unions on site will be talking to members about the procedure and process to challenge any unfair deduction of wages.” Unite regional officer Heathcliffe Pettifer said the union was “actively working to bring the situation to a satisfactory resolution”.

The dispute raises fundamental issues over workers’ ability to defend their safety and livelihoods against a management regime backed by the trade union bureaucracy, the state and one of the largest energy projects in Britain.

Hinkley Point C, being built by French state-owned energy giant EDF, is a cornerstone of Britain’s energy policy. EDF is expected to reap profits of between £80-100 billion over the 35-year lifespan of the contract signed with the British government for the electricity supplied when it is operational. A network of major contractors and subcontractors are involved in its construction. MEH Alliance, comprising Altrad Services, Cavendish Nuclear, Balfour Beatty, NG Bailey and Altrad Babcock, is responsible for much of the plant’s mechanical, electrical and HVAC installation work. The sprawling site is 1.5-2 square miles the size of around 250 football pitches.

The project has been beset by delays and soaring costs, with

EDF's latest estimate placing the cost at up to £47.9 billion, compared with around £18 billion when construction was approved. As EDF and its contractors seek to protect their profits, workers face mounting pressure through intensified workloads and attacks on safety protections. It is under these conditions that workers have repeatedly been compelled to take matters into their own hands

The current dispute follows a series of previous incidents exposing dangerous conditions.

In July last year, between 3,000 and 4,000 MEH workers participated in two unofficial walkouts in the space of a week against workplace bullying by senior management.

Media reports at the time noted that workers were furious at the lack of union support. Unite and the GMB moved quickly to contain the dispute. The removal of one manager pending an investigation was used to dissipate opposition and channel workers back into grievance procedures controlled jointly by management and the unions.

Months before workers complained that the site was overrun by rats particularly around canteen facilities. Once again EDF stressed its close partnership with the unions. Again Unite and the GMB declined meaningful public comment while seeking to minimise workers' concerns.

Whether the issue is management bullying, hygiene, fatigue, unsafe procedures or management intimidation, the unions intervene not to organise a struggle but to suppress independent action and return workers to mechanisms controlled jointly with the employers.

The consequences of safety failures are deadly. On November 13, 2022, 48-year-old site supervisor Jason Waring died after suffering fatal injuries in a construction incident involving mobile plant. Waring was employed by BYLOR, a joint venture between Bouygues Travaux Publics SAS and Laing O'Rourke Delivery Ltd.

Following an investigation by the Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR), criminal charges were brought against Bouygues Travaux Publics SAS, Laing O'Rourke Delivery Ltd and NNB Generation Company (HPC) Ltd, the EDF subsidiary overseeing the project. All three companies have pleaded not guilty. A Crown Court trial has been scheduled to begin on January 17, 2028—more than five years after Waring's death

For workers on the site, every unresolved safety concern raises broader questions about accountability and the value placed on human life. The prolonged delays in the legal process reinforce the perception that major corporations enjoy effective immunity while workers bear the consequences.

The conduct of Unite and the GMB exposes the real character of the corporatist arrangements promoted with the Starmer government. The Employment Rights Act has been presented as the "biggest upgrade in workers' rights for a generation." However, when confronted with a determined struggle by workers to defend their life and wellbeing and the employers use blatant intimidation, the bureaucracy can be relied upon to

demobilise opposition.

When workers raise concerns about safety, they are ignored. When they take action independently, they are locked out, docked pay and confronted with a police operation.

Workers cannot entrust the defence of their safety and livelihoods to organisations that function as industrial partners of management. The lockout at Hinkley Point C demonstrates that the defence of basic rights requires workers to organise independently of the union bureaucracy and challenge the corporatist arrangements that subordinate their interests to those of Starmer government and big business.

The way forward lies in the formation of a rank-and-file committee, independent of Unite and the GMB and democratically controlled by workers themselves.

Such a committee must fight for the immediate restoration of all docked wages and full protection for every worker against victimisation and disciplinary action. It must insist upon the unrestricted right of workers to halt work whenever conditions pose a threat to health and safety. Workers must exercise control over shift patterns to combat fatigue and unsafe working practices imposed in the interests of productivity and profit.

A rank-and-file committee should demand full transparency regarding all accidents, injuries and safety incidents on site and organise a worker-led investigation into the death of Jason Waring and other serious incidents resulting in injury.

The WSWS encourages workers to send in reports of their struggle, now being kept under wraps by the union bureaucracy, which can be published anonymously.



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