

# UK North Sea offshore workers vote to strike against Apache

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Offshore workers in the North Sea have voted for strike action in a major pay dispute with US-based oil and gas giant, Apache.

Unite has yet to announce a strike date after a mandate it described as “emphatic” by its 160 members in a ballot that closed on October 1. It stated in an October 5 press release that strike action “could begin this month”.

Workers including electrical experts, production technicians and radio operators rejected the company’s “final offer” of just 4 percent. APA Corporation, Apache’s US parent, reported \$1.4 billion in after-tax profits and \$9.2 billion in revenue last year. Unite says the 4 percent offer represents a real-terms cut for many workers. General Secretary Sharon Graham has denounced Apache for “raking in eye-watering profits” and treating highly skilled workers with contempt.

Apache workers are spread across seven assets associated with the Forties and Beryl oil fields. Unite says a stoppage could bring one of the North Sea’s major platforms, known as Charlie, to a standstill and disrupt the Forties pipeline system which is an artery for a third of the UK’s oil and gas production.

Apache workers have tremendous leverage in a struggle, but Graham is trying to get ahead of this development. Performance politics about corporate greed is combined with warnings that Apache has forced the dispute, with industrial officer Steve Davies stating, “We have been left with no other option than to ballot for strike action.”

Workers at Apache must take charge of their struggle and formulate their own demands. If the final offer is unacceptable, the company is making huge profits, and the workforce has voted for action, then there is no justification for Unite delaying a strike. This allows the company to put in place contingency arrangements to mitigate against the action. Graham is protecting the billionaire companies she denounces from a sector-wide struggle, with each dispute put down to a “bad employer” while workers’ opposition is smothered and the union bureaucracy’s seat at the corporate table preserved.

## **Unite blocks summer strikes in North Sea**

Unite officials stepped in to prevent strike action in mid-July by its members on the Elgin Franklin and North Alwyn platforms operated by Neo next+ Energy EP Limited. The company is the product of the merger between Neo Next and TotalEnergies UK Upstream oil and gas operations.

Around 50 Unite members, control room, production and senior operators alongside operations and production technicians, rejected a below 3 percent pay offer. A series of five days of strike action was due to start from July 17.

Unite promoted a “bumper pay award”, stating that it had proven strike action was unnecessary and the threat alone had shifted the employer. According to Unite this consisted of an additional £4,000 a year on pay and allowances.

## **Wood Group: fire and rehire**

The isolation tactics of the Unite leadership are also on display with the dispute against the major contractor Wood Group on Harbour Energy’s offshore oil and gas platforms.

According to Unite, these workers are due to begin two days of strike action on October 6 against cuts to pay and conditions, including fire-and-rehire notices. Further stoppages are scheduled for October 20–21 and November 3–4, affecting Harbour Energy platforms including Britannia, Jasmine, Judy, Lomond and North Everest. Although the workers are employed by Wood Group, they are working on installations operated by one of the North Sea’s major oil and gas producers.

Graham calls fire and rehire “corporate greed in its worst form.” But it cannot be treated as a problem confined to Wood Group workers.

Apache workers face a pay cut. Wood Group workers face attacks on established terms and fire and rehire. Neo next

workers also faced below-inflation pay. These are all rooted in the same drive by corporations seeking to protect profits by making workers' pay. Unite has not released any information publicly on the content of the fire and rehire contracts, the extent of the pay cuts or the number of workers involved in the dispute.

The employers are carrying out a co-ordinated offensive, but offshore workers are being denied the means to wage a counteroffensive by the union bureaucracy.

Unite, GMB and the Rail, Maritime and Transport union officials condemned unofficial strikes by hundreds of workers across multiple North Sea installations in March and September 2022, in what was described as a "wage revolution". The action was organised by the Offshore Oil and Gas Workers Strike Committee, which denounced the unions for years of inaction and criticised the Energy Services Agreement (ESA)—the collective bargaining framework with offshore energy-service contractors—as a mechanism for holding down pay, terms and conditions.

The union officials joined hands with the contractors, including Wood Group, to decry the unofficial action for causing "reputational damage" and threatening future deals on jobs and pay.

## **War, fuel prices and profits**

The struggles of North Sea offshore workers cannot be separated from the wider assault on workers' living standards.

Both are products of the same war drive. Adding to the impact of sanctions placed on Russia, the criminal US-Israeli war against Iran has disrupted oil supplies from the Gulf, which have sent UK diesel prices to a record £2 a litre and petrol to £1.75 a four year high. Households are to be hit by increases in energy bills of 4 percent in October, while forecasts suggest a further increase of up to 16 percent in January.

Apache/APA, Harbour Energy and the oil and gas producers in the North Sea are profiteering from this, as well as the energy companies.

The NATO war against Russia in Ukraine continues to escalate, with the Labour government under Andy Burnham deepening Britain's participation in both conflicts — dispatching military support for Saudi Arabia in Yemen, doubling down on Trump's lies that Iran poses a global threat and pouring in weapons to Ukraine.

A fight against the North Sea oil and gas barons cannot be waged by those who support this war drive. Graham has

been among the most enthusiastic cheerleaders for rearmament, demanding billions more in arms spending. In short, the same bureaucracy that is bottling up the Apache dispute is lending its support to wars that are driving up fuel prices and bleeding the working class dry.

## **Workers need their own organisation**

Workers at Apache should demand an immediate strike date. They should call for joint rank-and-file meetings with Wood Group, Neo Next and other North Sea workers, with demands for:

- a substantial pay rise restoring lost purchasing power
- payment of all back pay
- no fire and rehire or attacks on established conditions
- coordinated industrial action across the North Sea
- full disclosure of all offers and negotiations
- no cancellation of action without a genuine rank-and-file vote

Rank-and-file committees are needed to coordinate a fight for these demands independently of the union bureaucracy and prevent each dispute being worn down and settled on the employers' terms.

The Forties Pipeline demonstrates the leverage Apache workers possess. Neo next demonstrates how that leverage can be contained through a settlement before any strike action. Wood Group demonstrates the consequences of leaving workers to fight attacks such as fire and rehire separately. The task is to break the isolation.

The fight for a genuine pay increase is part of a broader struggle to defend workers' living standards against profit gouging and the diversion of funding for vital social services into war. The workers who produce the oil cannot be indifferent to the wars being fought over it, or to the government waging that war while their living standards and those of the working class are slashed. To win, they must organise across company boundaries, oppose the war drive, and take control of their struggles.



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