North Sea Apache workers stage second walk-out, further strikes divided by Unite

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[TOPICS: Britain, Europe, Oil and gas workers, Global class struggle, War and militarism, US-NATO Conflict with Russia over Ukraine, NATO, Russia **]**

A November 4 one day strike by 170 offshore workers employed by US based oil and gas giant Apache shut down seven of its operations on platforms in the North Sea. The workers have rejected a 'final pay offer' of just 4 percent—a real-terms cut.

The action follows a one-day stoppage on October 21, which brought Apache's operations to a standstill and was subject to a news blackout by the media and Unite the Union. The strikes involve workers across different grades: electrical experts, production technicians and radio operators.

General Secretary Sharon Graham has declared that members 'have no option but to escalate their strike action in the face of a belligerent offshore operator which is making billions of pounds in profit.' But the actual schedule of action is not an escalation but a carefully staggered series of token stoppages designed to limit the impact on Apache's operations and keep the initiative in the hands of the company and the union bureaucracy.

The plan to fragment the collective struggle is laid out in Unite's press release on November 3. The one-day stoppage on November 4 is followed by a further 24-hour action between November 13-14 involving only the Forties Alpha, Forties Bravo, Forties Delta and Beryl Bravo platforms. The remaining three installations—Forties Charlie, Forties Echo and Beryl Alpha—are to strike separately between November 15-16.

This is a retreat from the all-out action which demonstrated the collective power of Apache workers. A genuine escalation would mean all seven platforms out together, indefinitely to assert worker's demands against Apache. Instead, Unite is rationing the strike, handing Apache advance notice of which assets will be affected on which days, and allowing the company to plan ways around each stoppage. The union's October 19 statement had already acknowledged that a strike could halt Charlie, a major platform, and disrupt the Forties Pipeline System carrying around a third of UK oil and gas production.

The contradiction between Unite's rhetoric and its practice is exposed by the union's description of the company's conduct. Unite accuses Apache of 'misleading claims,' of operating a 'detrimental' seven-day 'claw back' policy—above the industry average. The "claw back" policy requires workers to complete days of work for which they receive no additional payment, with the company treating these days as already accounted for within their existing salary arrangements.

Unite Scottish Deputy Secretary Dougie Maguire states that 'many of our Apache members are being offered a real terms pay cut' and that these are 'irrefutable facts.' Apache's US parent, APA Corporation, reported $1.4 billion in after-tax profits on revenues of $9.2 billion last year.

Yet faced with a company that by Unite's own account is engaged in 'shameful corporate greed,' the union's response is a series of one-day stoppages spread over three weeks. This is the 'leverage' strategy in action: the use of the threat of disruption not to defeat the employer, but to secure a seat at the boardroom table. Graham's plea for Apache to table an 'acceptable offer' that would not make 'even a dent in their profits' made the union's perspective explicit. The aim is a face-saving concession that can be sold to members as a victory while the bureaucracy proves its services to the employer in policing more militant demands rejecting the prioritisation of Apache's profits.

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Fire and rehire also met with token stoppages

The same pattern is on display in the dispute with major contractor Wood Group, where Unite members on Harbour Energy's Britannia, Jasmine, Judy, Lomond and North Everest platforms are fighting the company's decision to 'slash the pay and conditions of dozens of workers including the issuing of fire and rehire notices.' Fire and rehire is the most fundamental attack on workers' rights—the unilateral tearing up of contracts and the reimposition of inferior terms under threat of dismissal. Unite's industrial officer, Vic Fraser, describes Wood Group as 'a rogue employer.'

And what is the union's response to this assault? A 48-hour stoppage on November 3-4, followed by another 48-hour stoppage on November 17-18—two weeks later.

Unite, along with their counterparts in the GMB and the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union have a long record of suppressing rather than leading the struggle of North Sea workers. In March and September 2022, hundreds of workers across multiple installations struck unofficially for an industry-wide 'wage revolution.' The three unions responded with a joint statement denouncing the demand as 'a smash and grab operation' that would 'put the whole thing at risk,' defending instead their collective bargaining arrangement--the Energy Services Agreement--with Wood Group and other contractors. In July this year, Unite intervened to avert strike action by 50 workers on Neo Next+ Energy's platforms after members rejected a below-3-percent pay offer, declaring an additional £4,000 a 'bumper pay award.' In October, it hailed a 9-percent rise spread over two years for 70 EnQuest members, boasting that 'there was no need for a dispute.'

Break from the bureaucracy, build rank-and-file committees

This is the record of an apparatus whose function is to guarantee industrial peace, not to lead workers in struggle. The same bureaucracy is an enthusiastic supporter of the war drive that is enriching the oil and gas operators while immiserating the working class. Graham has been among the most vocal advocates of rearmament, demanding billions more in arms spending. This as the criminal US-Israeli war against Iran, the escalating NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the sanctions regime have driven UK diesel prices to a record £2 a litre and pushed household energy bills up by 4 percent in October--with a further increase of up to 16 percent forecast for January.

Andy Burnham’s Labour government is deepening Britain's participation in both conflicts. Every pound diverted to the military is a pound denied to wages, the National Health Service and social services.

The Apache and Wood Group workers cannot win under the control of an apparatus that declares corporate profits sacred and isolates each dispute to grind down opposition. Workers must establish rank-and-file committees to formulate their own demands and coordinate action independently of the union bureaucracy.

The demands of the Apache workers must include a substantial pay rise restoring lost purchasing power, the payment of all back pay, the abolition of the claw-back policy. Wood Group workers must demand the immediate withdrawal of all fire-and-rehire notices and the restoration of all terms and conditions. Both disputes must be linked and extended to the struggles of offshore workers across the North Sea, overcoming the isolation imposed by the Unite and all the unions.

The rank-and-file committees must be built on the platforms, elected by and accountable to the workers, with the power to call and coordinate action without reference to the union apparatus. They must establish direct communication between the Apache and Wood Group disputes, and with workers on other installations and other companies, to prepare for unified, industry-wide action. They must take control of the strike schedule, replacing the union's staggered token stoppages with all-out action and connect their fight to the broader struggle of the working class against austerity and war.



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