

HEATHROW WORKERS' POWER

An independent voice for workers during the strikes

"What's been going on?!"

March 2021 saw an escalation of the long running dispute at Heathrow Airport Limited (HAL). HAL's "fire and rehire" plans, announced last summer, have been subject to ongoing strike action from fire fighters, security and engineers since December 2020.

Strike tactics

The strikes until now, (9 in total) have been no more than one or two days in length. In an apparent attempt to up the ante, Unite, the union representing HAL workers, threatened a month of targeted actions in April. 41 actions spread over 23 days. Unite had adjusted their tactics in February and March, opting for short 4-hour strikes. This was intended to limit the loss of pay for staff and to make it harder for HAL to get scabs in to cover the work. HAL reacted by insisting that if a worker was on strike at any point in the shift, they would lose pay for the entire shift.

It looks as though the company's stance had an effect, as Unite changed tack again for the proposed April strikes, opting for full shift walkouts. Sections within Fire, Campus Security and Engineering would each alternate strike actions throughout April. Reasoning seemed to be that, if the company wasn't going to pay staff the whole shift, they might as well strike for the whole shift. Why a total workforce walkout wasn't preferable or possible isn't clear. On 1st April, the planned strikes were cancelled. We were told that a pay offer negotiated between HAL and Unite would be presented to the members to vote on. Ballots have now been sent out, and Unite is recommending the workforce accepts the deal.

The pay offer hasn't been hailed as a major victory in the way that most of these compromise deals are. This may be because the details of the proposal don't address the major causes of the dispute. The "fire and rehire" plans left many staff facing 20% pay cuts, the removal of incremental pay increases for long service and abatement clauses (clauses that make redundancy more expensive for the company) from their contracts, along with other reductions in benefits. This deal leaves these issues unresolved and instead offers conditional pay rises of 2.5% in 2022 and 2023.



The pay rises are dependent on annual passenger numbers being above 60 million. While this was certainly achievable before the pandemic (passenger numbers have been above 60 million for the last two decades), the continuing uncertainty concerning air travel - variants, vaccine passports, red list restrictions etc. - now makes this passenger level difficult to achieve. Last year, Heathrow saw just 22.1 million passengers.

The linking of pay increases to passenger numbers also sets an unhealthy precedent for aviation workers. Our living costs don't go down if our company is doing badly, do they?! And being employed in a polluting industry is enough of a contradiction, without directly linking our standard of living to passenger numbers. It could erect further barriers to the necessary transition away from ever increasing passenger numbers and airport expansions. Leaving that aside, if the required passenger levels are achieved and staff get the total 5% by 2023, a substantial portion of the workforce will still be on inferior contracts and be 15% poorer without adjusting for inflation. If the passenger numbers aren't achieved no one gets anything.

There appears to be some dissatisfaction with the offer, but other workers we've spoken to seem convinced this is the best deal available. Whatever the outcome, the fact will be that a company has once again managed to successfully downgrade contracts at one of the most densely unionised workplaces in the country.

How have they managed to do this? Is it just a simple matter of workers not having the bargaining power to sufficiently fightback during a pandemic? The fall in demand for air travel is a major problem, but not the whole story. The same patterns have played out at numerous other UK workplaces. Workers at British Gas,



ESS catering and cleaning staff at the MoD, porters at NHS trusts, Go North West bus drivers and many others, have all faced attacks on contracts, by companies with flimsy or non-existent economic justifications. If working people at unionised and profitable companies are still unable to resist assaults on their contracts, obviously something deeper is happening.

The issues internal to the disputes are very similar. Strike ballots take too long, causing anger to dissipate and giving companies time to prepare for any eventual actions. In the long period leading up to the moment when workers can finally legally strike, we need to be applying pressure in whatever ways possible. These efforts can often be constrained by unions obsessed with presenting themselves as "reasonable" during negotiations. Unless workers have forums in which to discuss these issues, outside the unions, we'll keep repeating this mistake. Picket lines are too small and isolated to be the effective campaign tools they are intended to be. At many workplaces (British Gas, Go North West, HAL, British Airways etc.) sizeable chunks of the workforce voted to accept the companies terms earlier in the disputes, leaving the remaining workforce out on the proverbial limb. Disputes remain largely isolated within their companies. Solidarity between companies or even departments is rare. For example, NHS workers are mobilising in opposition to the insulting 1% pay offer in England and Wales and 4% in Scotland they received in March. But already, Unison has unilaterally recommended the offer of 4% to workers in Scotland. This undermines their own demands for a £2000 uplift, stabs unions still fighting for 15% in the back, and scuppers the chances of a unified cross-border response.

Companies have been able to cover the work of strikers and this hasn't been effectively challenged throughout the recent disputes. Go North West are openly running a scab bus service that is undermining the ongoing strike action in Manchester. There is footage of workers attempting to disrupt the scab service. Unfortunately, the low number of workers involved makes it difficult, especially when, either scabs or hired goons come out of the garage and start assaulting the picketers. And while Unite's main efforts are confined to asking Mayor of Manchester, Andy "King of the North" Burnham, to denounce the company and lobby parliament to get "fire and rehire" banned, escalation of efforts to stop the scab bus service has been neglected. On May 3rd, a well attended May Day demonstration was organised by Manchester Trades Council and marched to the bus garage on the Queen's

Road in Cheetham's Hill. Hopefully efforts like this are applying pressure on company. The lead banner at the demo and the speeches at the rally emphasised the importance of outlawing "fire and rehire." A great deal of noise is being made about banning "fire and rehire," without enough discussion about whether this will be sufficient or even effective. On the 26th April, Unite launched a national campaign to end "fire and rehire."

Ongoing strikes at software company Goodlord, Go North West and Fife Council were coordinated and demonstrations held at various locations. The campaign has started with the usual photo ops with MP's and the union top brass. Some demonstrations were targeted at company subsidiaries. The online launch material contained quotes from MP's denouncing "fire and rehire". One such quote was from the Right Honourable protector of the working class, Jacob Rees-Mogg. This law is unlikely to be a crushing defeat for the rich and powerful if MP's of this variety are willing to pass it.

Even if a law is passed, unless workers have the unity and therefore the power, to resist the companies will obviously find a way round these legal measures. We can see an example with aviation workers at WISAG in Germany, who were recently the victims of a "fire and rehire" scheme. In order to keep their jobs at Frankfurt Airport, they were made to apply for their jobs at "another company," which just so happened to be a subsidiary of WISAG.

So what are our options in a stressful time when things move quickly and often behind closed doors? Well, we have to be prepared by studying how these things go, and be ready to capitalise on opportunities that will make us stronger. During the HAL dispute, at least two opportunities for cross company collaboration at Heathrow arose, that a more confident and organised working class may have capitalised on. Unite members at BA Cargo in their own "fire and rehire" dispute and Passport Control staff with the PCS union, battling an unworkable roster change, both voted to strike at the same time as HAL workers had their strike mandate running. BA and Passport Control staff both reached agreement with their employers before, and separately from, the HAL workers. It's not easy to build the sense of support and solidarity necessary to combine these kinds of dispute, but it has happened before, and can happen again.

London Bus Driver Disputes

Hounslow Heath bus drivers to the rescue!

The recent London bus strikes are another example of these familiar dynamics playing out. Bus drivers at three subsidiaries (London United, London Sovereign and Quality Line) of the same parent company (RATP) began challenging their company's derisive pay offers (as low as 0.5%) at the same time. Ballots were called and strikes began in February. In late March, Unite suspended strikes at London Sovereign and Quality Line garages. The revised pay offers were meagre increases of 0.25%. The offers were at first rejected by some garages, but after further talk and suspended strikes, the pay offers were reluctantly accepted by relatively narrow margins at the two subsidiaries.

Unite's decision to bargain with the subsidiaries separately had left the drivers at London United striking alone, as their company was refusing to improve the 0.5% offer.

The London United action was given a welcome boost when the original five garages, including Hounslow and Park Royal, were joined by Hounslow Heath and Stamford Brook garages, after they voted to strike in early April. On 25 April, the scheduled London United strikes were suspended, while details of a new offer are finalised.

Another 4,000 London bus drivers are currently considering strike action over Metroline's "remote sign-on" plans. "Remote sign-on" is a blatant attempt to casualise the bus drivers. Drivers won't be expected to report to a garage at the start of their shift, but instead Metroline will require drivers to report to particular stops at designated times. The Go North West bus drivers are facing the same changes and drivers everywhere will eventually be affected.



British Gas 'fire and rehire'

After 3 months of strike action, the dispute ended in defeat on 14th April with hundreds of engineers being sacked. Last summer, workers at British Gas were informed that they would be losing their jobs if they failed to accept detrimental changes to their contracts. Engineers with the GMB voted twice to reject the new terms. At the same time, British Gas office staff with Unison, under recommendation from their union, voted to accept the changes. This decision hampered workers' efforts from the outset. There's a good article here: <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/04/a-letter-from-a-sacked-british-gas-worker>

cont. The British Airways Cargo strike, over the Christmas period 2020, was probably the most effective recent action at Heathrow. That action, which took place in relatively favourable conditions for the workforce (Cargo division still profitable, widespread port disruptions, 90% plus staff walk out, busy Christmas period etc.), still resulted in a deal that didn't safeguard the workforce's conditions in their entirety.

The outcome was much better than if they'd done nothing, but still, ground was given, because the wider BA workforce had already done departmental deals, isolating the action.

Divisions amongst the Cargo workers to do with qualitatively different contracts and work roles between newer and older staff, as it often does on the airport, limited the likelihood of escalating the dispute.

Parliament won't save us. Businesses will find a way to drive down our conditions for as long as we fail to unite in opposition against them, directly in our workplaces and communities. The time, money and resources wasted lobbying politicians and courting a media that doesn't care, could be better deployed in direct action, to forcibly block the companies scab operations and stage pickets, blockades and demonstrations that hit the companies where it hurts.

Heathrow Parking Charges

The GMB has started a campaign against increases to parking charges at Heathrow. On top of the removal of free local bus services late last year, staff can now expect increases of 135% for the pleasure of parking at work, as HAL looks to pass more of the cost of the pandemic onto low paid workers. The GMB have started a petition for free staff parking at Heathrow.

Airport news from across the UK and beyond...

Manchester Airports Group

Unite have made an agreement for staff at Manchester Airport Group (MAG) that they are hailing as a benchmark deal for the aviation industry. Under the agreement, workers who are not required for work will receive 80% of their full pay (which is applicable regardless of any government support through the Job Retention Scheme). Workers who are in work for up to 85% of their normal hours will receive 90% of their full pay and those who are working for 85% and above of their normal hours will receive 100% of their pay. A fair share arrangement has also been established to ensure that work is shared out on an equitable footing and an oversight committee has been installed to ensure that the agreement is effectively implemented.

Unite members accepted the agreement with an 85% yes vote in favour and members of Prospect and Unison have also accepted the agreement.

MAG staff have already paid a huge price during the pandemic. 465 directly employed staff have been made redundant, plus another 1500 contractors at the airports (800 from Swissport and 300 from Menzies) and a 10% pay cut across the board since the beginning of the crisis. This agreement continues on with those pay cuts. Surely these workers have given enough already?

Missoula, USA

Non-union airport workers in Missoula, Montana, USA staged a walkout against the poverty wages at their workplace. \$9.65! That is £6.93 at the current exchange rate! The company, Unifi, claim they had no problem getting management scabs to cover their work. The ground handling and ramp workers were isolated and have now been fired. They showed a lot of dignity and courage walking off the job. It is possible to carry out actions without the union, but if there was a plan or strategy with this walkout, something went very wrong with it. The strikers have since got new jobs at Alaska Airlines on over \$12 and through protest have drawn the attention of the Missoula County Commissioner who has written a letter of "dismay" to Unifi.

New York and New Jersey, USA

Airport workers with the SEIU union at New York and New Jersey airports are striking and demonstrating for a decent healthcare package and no givebacks. (Whatever givebacks are?!)

Frankfurt, Germany

The WISAG workers fired from their jobs for refusing to accept the inferior contracts continue their fight for justice. They are staging noisy demonstrations at airports and state buildings most weeks. We have sent a message of solidarity and support. We stated that we would like to help them more practically and that we hoped to speak with them to see how we might help them further.

Optimism over Despair

We regularly hear our friends, family and workmates saying "nothing can be done," "there isn't any money" and "the country's bankrupt." We need organisations where we can productively channel our anger, not institutions through which we can express our collective inferiority. Even in times of crisis, such as these, we have the collective strength to demand a great deal more than loans and tax cuts for the companies we work at. Get in touch if you think along similar lines!

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