

GMB union calls off British Gas strike to enter talks

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The GMB trade union has called off the latest round of strikes by British Gas engineers to enter negotiations with the company. After taking 15 days of strike action against plans to impose an inferior contract by a “fire and rehire” scheme, the union and Centrica, parent company of British Gas, emailed workers last Friday that new talks were going ahead.

The 7,000 workers were due to hold four days of action from Friday and two more four-day blocks of strikes on February 19 and 26. The new contracts would mean an effective 20 percent pay cut, with some workers losing up to £15,000 a year.

The strike had resulted, according to the GMB, in a backlog of 210,000 home visits for repairs and a quarter of a million planned annual service visits cancelled. Despite being held amid freezing conditions and in the middle of a pandemic, according to a survey conducted by Survation, 74 percent of British Gas customers support the action.

The union moved to call off the strike Thursday evening and have been in talks since Friday at the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service, the traditional graveyard for strikes.

On Sunday, a GMB spokesman said, “After talks with Acas, GMB members voted to support a temporary cessation of hostilities. The company has suspended its actions against our members and in turn the strike has been suspended.”

According to reports, the email sent by the GMB to its members made no mention of the company having rejected its fire and rehire agenda. Workers continued to be kept in the dark with a three paragraph email from “GMB National Reps” declaring Friday, “during today’s talks your national reps believe enough movement has been achieved to justify suspension of Saturday’s strike action, whilst talks continue

tomorrow.”

Concerned strikers took to social media, fearing a sellout. One said on Twitter Saturday, “GMB have gone [off] the reservation on these talks, why are they discussing terms and conditions though the mandate for strike was fire and rehire off the table so we could hit the other items, getting a feeling they’ll come back and say this is the best we can do, pension flashback.”

Another worker responded, “If the GMB Suspend more than one day of strike action for anything less than removal of fire and rehire, this will be the end of British Gas and our relationship with the union.”

Another similarly commented, “If the GMB sells us up the river with these talks with British gas, and Fire and rehire is not off the table before talks carry on. I will be one cancelling my GMB membership for sure.”

Other comments read, “The strike is to have fire and rehire removed so the GMB union have no mandate to cancel it just because an offer has been made,” and “absolute joke of a company and a union unfortunately sold out... Bottom line they have sold us out.”

The GMB’s Sunday statement said, “GMB is committed to getting a deal but it won’t be a deal at any price... We need meaningful negotiations and an end to the threat to sack our members en masse.”

No-one can believe any of this. Left in the hands of the GMB, the only outcome will be a repeat of the rotten deals struck by three of the other unions recognised by British Gas—Unison, Unite and Prospect. Most of the 7,000 front-line office workers who were told that there was no alternative to accepting British Gas’ terms are members of the largest public sector union, Unison.

For weeks, the GMB did everything to try and reach a rotten agreement. It held a consultative ballot in August after British Gas revealed its plans, returning a 90

percent vote in favour, but delayed calling a strike ballot for months. This gave space for the other unions to negotiate their sellouts.

Only in November did the GMB ballot members for strike action. The vote announced in December produced an 86 percent majority for strike action by gas and electrical engineers, and 89 percent by other British Gas GMB members.

Centrica, British Gas's parent company, announced it was prepared to issue section 188 notices to its employees. This enables an employer who has failed to negotiate changes to fire and then reinstate its employees on different terms and conditions.

British Gas employees are combatting a national assault by big business on the working class. "Fire and rehire" ultimatums are becoming the chosen method by which companies push through long-planned attacks on workers' jobs and conditions, often using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext.

The unions' only concern is that such methods undermine their role as a labour police force, able to impose changes on behalf of the employers while enjoying a comfortable working relationship with the company. At a UK parliament business select committee discussing the dispute on February 2, GMB national officer Justin Bowden accused the company of "poisoning the well".

Rather than appeal to solidarity from other sections of workers within British Gas or workers in other industries facing similar fire and re-hire threats, the GMB directed its appeals to Centrica shareholders. It sent a letter signed by 4,850 GMB members and supporters, with a press release dated February 11 noting how it urged "high-profile investors, including Schroders, Standard Life Aberdeen and Blackrock to protect their investment and help secure a negotiated end to the industrial dispute." The shareholders targeted own about 85 percent of Centrica.

The letter signed by GMB national secretary, Justin Bowden, stressed, "We believe that we have a joint interest in persuading Centrica's senior management from changing its current course, before more damage is done to the company (and, consequently, the value of your investment)..."

The letter urged, "We want a sustainable future for Centrica—we fear that it is at risk of becoming a pariah company in UK public life instead," noting,

"Centrica's single greatest challenge is the long-term erosion of its customer base. More than three million customers have been lost over the last decade, and according to the July 2020 interim financial update, the company lost 296,000 home energy and services customers in the first six months of last year alone... GMB members did not seek this conflict, but with every day that passes the long-term structural threats to Centrica's customer base will grow."

The letter reiterated GMB's willingness to assist the company bring in the attacks on workers conditions stating, "We recognise that change is needed... Unilaterally tearing up collective agreements, and threatening to fire thousands of skilled and hard-to-replace workers... is not an approach that will secure an agreement... GMB stands ready to continue talks, but we are clear that 'fire and rehire' must be taken off the table."

The union ended strikes without fire and rehire being taken off the table.

UK companies are turning to "fire and rehire" ultimatums to push through long planned attacks, for which the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as an accelerator. Research by the Trades Union Congress published in January showed nearly one in 10 workers have had to re-apply for their jobs on inferior terms and conditions since March last year. Nearly a quarter of workers had experienced a cut in pay or hours since March.

British Gas workers must take their dispute out of the hands of the GMB and not allow trade union bureaucrats to sign away their jobs, pay and conditions. The first step must be the formation of rank and file strike committees which will reach out to other British Gas workers and energy workers at other firms facing the same attacks. The Socialist Equality Party will offer every assistance in this struggle and we urge workers to contact us today to discuss the way forward.



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