

Workers begin strike at UK's largest shipping container port

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Workers protest outside the UK's biggest container port Felixstowe as they begin an 8-day strike [Toby Melville/Reuters]

London, August 22 (RHC)-- Workers at the United Kingdom's largest container port have begun what they say will be an eight-day strike, becoming the latest workers in the country to take action to demand higher pay amid rising inflation and the soaring cost of living.

Nearly 2,000 workers at the Port of Felixstowe, which handles about four million containers a year from 2,000 ships accounting for more than half of the country's incoming shipping freight, walked off the job on

Sunday.

The dispute has raised fears of supply chain problems and comes as the transport industry is already reeling from work stoppages, with only one in five trains running in the UK on Saturday amid a railway workers' strike.

Postal workers also plan a four-day strike later this month, while telecoms giant BT recently faced its first stoppage in decades. Amazon warehouse staff, criminal lawyers and refuse collectors are among those who have staged walkouts in recent weeks.

"Strike action will cause huge disruption and will generate massive shockwaves throughout the UK's supply chain, but this dispute is entirely of the company's own making," Bobby Morton, the national officer for docks at the Unite union, which represents the striking Felixstowe workers, told Reuters news agency.

"It [the company] has had every opportunity [to] make our members a fair offer but has chosen not to do so."

For its part, the Port of Felixstowe, which is owned by CK Hutchison Holding Ltd, said in a statement it was "disappointed" the walkout had gone ahead and called its offer of salary increases of on average 8 percent "fair".

"The port provides secure and well-paid employment and there will be no winners from this unnecessary industrial action," it added.

Inflation in the UK hit a 40-year high last month, crossing 10 percent amid soaring food and energy prices driven, in part, by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24.

Reporting from Felixstowe, Al Jazeera's Harry Fawcett said, "Workers are struggling, as are so many across the United Kingdom, with this rampant rise in the cost of living both in terms of goods inflation, but also really frightening rises in the cost of fuelling people's homes."

Still, he added, the strike could worsen an already precarious situation. Shipping group Maersk, one of the world's biggest container shippers, has warned the action would have a significant effect, causing operational delays and forcing it to make changes to its vessel lineup.

"This is a massively important port, especially in terms of textiles, but also all sorts of products brought in through here," Fawcett said.

"So there are businesses and there are consumers around the UK already struggling. And action like this, of course, is going to make those supply chains still more vulnerable and could be a factor in increased inflation going forwards.

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