

Dock workers in UK's Liverpool announce two-week strike in pay dispute

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UK dockworkers are set to walk out at the Port of Liverpool over pay. (File photo by Reuters)

London, September 20 (RHC)-- Hundreds of dock workers at the Port of Liverpool have decided to go on a two-week strike in a dispute over pay and continuing industrial unrest after negotiations with their employer failed.

Reports on Monday said workers at the Peel Ports Group, which runs the container operations in Liverpool, had rejected an 8.3 percent hike in salary enhanced with a one-time payment of £750 (\$875).

Port operatives and the engineering department were already slated to take industrial action starting Monday after workers at the Mersey Docks and Harbor Company [MDHC] container services unanimously voted in August in favor of the strike.

The 14-day walkout, scheduled to end on October 3, 2022, involves some 500 dockworkers employed at MDHC container services. The dockworkers strike at Peel Ports in Liverpool threatens more disruptions across the UK supply chain already hit by walkouts at Felixstowe port.

"Any disruption to the country's vulnerable supply chains would be extremely bad news for the sector, UK business and families across the country, with the effects being felt for many months," said Richard Mitchell, Port Director Liverpool Containers at Peel Ports Group.

"We remain committed to resolving the situation and, against the backdrop of a challenging current economic environment, have stretched the boundary to a sustainable position."

Mitchell said the company in Liverpool gives the dockworkers the "leading rates of pay and conditions" in the port industry, which is well above the national average and represents a sustainable position for the business, taking into account stagnation in the container market, worldwide economic pressures, the conflict in Ukraine and global shipping disruption.

Across the spectrum, the dockworkers' union, which is named Unite, argued that the company was to blame for the likely disruptions. "Even at this late stage strike action can still be avoided by the company returning to negotiations and making an offer that meets our members' expectations on pay and the other areas of concern," Unite regional officer Steven Gerrard said.

"Strike action will inevitably severely affect shipping and road transport as well as creating shortages in supply chains but this dispute is entirely of Peel Ports own making. Unite has held extensive negotiations with the company but it has refused to address members' concerns."

Meanwhile, UK business firms faced with rising overheads are looking to the government for support. "I have had several businesses say to me this is worse than COVID-19. Rising raw materials, soaring costs including labor, inflation at 10 percent, and now energy prices. They do not know where to turn. In May, 23 percent of our businesses said they would have to scale down production or cease trading," Shevaun Haviland, the director general of the British Chambers of Commerce, was quoted as saying.

Haviland said that many UK businesses had seen their energy costs increase by 300 percent or more compared with last year, adding to a list of financial problems that were causing them to question whether their businesses could survive.

A leading British think tank has warned that the inflation rate in the United Kingdom will soar to 'astronomical' levels over the next year. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) reported last month that not only will the massive inflation force the Bank of England to raise interest rates higher and for a longer period than previously expected, but also forecast a long recession that would last into 2023 and hammer millions of the most vulnerable households, particularly in the most deprived regions of the UK.

Making the matters worse, the crisis-stricken country has a new prime minister whose inauguration coincided with the Queen's death. Liz Truss admitted on Sunday that she was taking the helm of the country while facing a confluence of political and economic issues.

This is while British business organizations are already mounting pressure on her to take action and show "absolute clarity" on what help the government would offer the firms as the nation grapples with dire economic straits.

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