

Onslaught on jobs and conditions at British Telecom

By Barry Mason and Robert Stevens
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BT (British Telecom) is using the COVID-19 pandemic to step up long planned measures to push through massive job cuts and restructuring.

Two years ago, BT first announced its Better Workplace Programme restructuring operation and last June confirmed its intention to reduce its 300 sites down to 30. As part of the downsizing, BT will vacate its site in London in St Pauls, which had been its headquarters since the privatised company was set up in 1984.

BT employs over 100,000 staff. The reduction in the number of offices comes on top of proposals to cut its workforce by around 13,000, first announced in 2018.

BT CEO Philip Jansen, who took over in February 2019, vowed to continue the restructuring programme begun by his predecessor, Gavin Patterson. Quoted in an *I* article in May last year, Jansen confirmed that BT was set on a five-year cost-cutting plan to save £2 billion. The article stated, “[A]sked during the interview if the company’s headcount would be around 10 per cent lower after the restructuring plan had been implemented...,” Jansen replied this would “not be a stupid assumption”. The job cuts would come as BT introduces more automation in the businesses, with Jansen speaking of the necessity to end “outdated practices.”

A June 2019 Reuters report quoted a BT spokesperson boasting, “BT’s workplace improvement and consolidation programme is the biggest of its type ever undertaken in the UK and is expected to complete by 2023.” Eight of its new proposed offices with contact centres would be located in Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Ipswich, London and Manchester.

BT’s share price is down by nearly 40 percent this year, but some investors have taken advantage of the

low price to snap up shares, expecting the restructuring to pay big dividends. A June 21 *thismoney* website article noted that the Saudi Arabian government sovereign wealth fund had recently bought BT shares.

The Communications Workers Union (CWU) has issued a series of statements on the plans, with the union concerned only how they can be implemented without provoking a rebellion among the workforce.

A report on the CWU’s site of June 18 notes, “BT Group’s shock decision at the end of last month to attack redundancy and paid leaver terms by serving notice on the 2018 Pension Agreement—a development made all the more provocative by the timing of the announcement which fell on the eve of the first ever compulsory redundancy of a team member grade employee.”

Chris Power, of South East Central Branch, states, “At the moment my branch has had one member go on compulsory redundancy from Enterprise. There are six more scheduled to go at the end of August...” In total “we’ve got about 20 who will be made redundant against their will in our branch alone... You have to wonder how many hundreds, if not thousands, more of our members are going to be made redundant in the coming months.”

In response, the “union’s BT committee has agreed to a twin-track approach, under which talks will take place with the company in an attempt to defuse the biggest threat to decades of industrial peace since privatisation.

“We’ve already given the company every opportunity to see sense and change its position on the compulsory redundancies taking place in Enterprise—time and again proving that the surplus could be addressed in a different way, and saving a significant number of job in the process—but at this

point in time they are not responding in the right manner. BT Enterprise was formed in April 2018 and brings together BT's business, public sector and wholesale and ventures businesses."

The CWU declared its aim is "an acceptable way forward that meets the needs of both the business and employees." Only then does it raise the suggestion that "if there's no way through to an agreement with the company, we will have no option but to ballot for industrial action."

Workers can have no faith in the CWU, which has spent the last years suppressing struggles by its members, including national strike action, which had been voted for twice by huge majorities at Royal Mail.

What is most revealing about the CWU's response is the citing of the extraordinary levels it has gone to over the past 30 years to cement its partnership with BT. A February 7 statement headlined, "Stop this madness, CWU tell BT as one compulsory redundancy notice is issued," declares, "A massive threat to more than three decades of industrial peace in BT took a dramatic and dangerous turn for the worse on Wednesday [February 5] as Enterprise division management issued the first compulsory redundancy notice ever to have been served to a team member grade employee in BT group."

It continued, "The highly inflammatory move represents a huge escalation in what was already recognised to be the most serious challenge the union has faced in BT since the 1987 national strike."

The CWU stressed the role played over the years in enabling BT to cut jobs through voluntary redundancy. It stated that Enterprise's "bombshell that 367 jobs were 'at risk' in November last year" had "triggering CWU fury" as the company were "refusing to commit to deal with the surplus using time-honoured protocols based on voluntarism which have seen more than 100,000 leave BT since privatisation without the need for a single forced exit..."

The CWU extolled the middle management role of the union, stating that "in recent weeks it has repeatedly been the union, not management that has been doing most of the 'heavy lifting' to get the number of 'at risk' individuals down..."

CWU Deputy General Secretary Andy Kerr complained of "the obvious lunacy of any suggestion that a company the size of BT cannot find alternative

roles for a comparatively tiny surplus in Enterprise that pales into insignificance compared to the huge headcount reductions that have repeatedly taken place across BT, with the full co-operation of the CWU since privatisation."

The main concern of the CWU is to prove to BT it can be continued to be relied on to help smoothly implement the upcoming attacks—"Calling on management to stop pouring petrol on a fire that threatens to burn out of control if more compulsory redundancy notices are served in the coming weeks, Andy concludes: 'This is not a fight that the CWU has brought on—in fact we've done everything we possibly can to avert it by identifying practical solutions that can and do exist'."

In a final reassurance, Kerr insisted, "the CWU is committed to work with the company to achieve everything it wants without creating a needless industrial relations and staff morale crisis."

BT workers seeking a way to oppose the attacks on jobs and conditions must take the fight into their own hands or see thousands of more jobs lost and devastating attacks on their conditions and pensions. A vital step in opposing these plans is the establishing of workplace committees independent of the CWU to take this fight forward.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>