

Labour seeks to balance P&O criticism after Starmer slaps down call for boycott



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A [Labour](#) MP has sought to balance criticism of P&O Ferries after reports the Transport Secretary's call for a boycott of the company could have jeopardised a £1 billion investment in the UK.

Sir Keir Starmer has said Louise Haigh's call for a boycott of the ferry firm was "not the view of the Government".

[Liam Byrne](#) said [Louise Haigh](#) was "absolutely right" to say that the behaviour of P&O, owned by DP World, has been "completely unacceptable."

Mr Byrne, the MP for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North, said the ferry firm's past treatment of its workers is "the kind of behaviour that we can't have in this country".

But he added that the Government's Employment Rights Bill would provide a "very clear framework" on how companies can treat workers, which would "bite on" firms like P&O.



Liam Byrne sought to play down the row (Maja Smiejkowka/PA)
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Dubai-based DP World, P&O's parent firm, is reported to have been planning to announce a major investment in the UK at the Government's International Investment Summit next Monday.

But, according to Sky News, that investment is under review after Deputy [Prime Minister](#) Angela Rayner and Transport Secretary Ms Haigh repeated criticism of P&O Ferries.

The operator was criticised by politicians from both main parties in March 2022 when it suddenly sacked 800 British seafarers and replaced them with cheaper, mainly overseas, staff, saying it was necessary to stave off bankruptcy.

On Wednesday, Ms Rayner and Ms Haigh introduced legislation to prevent similar actions, with the Transport Secretary

describing P&O Ferries as “cowboy operators” and Ms Rayner saying the incident had been “an outrageous example of manipulation by an employer”.

In an ITV interview Ms Haigh went further, saying: “I’ve been boycotting P&O Ferries for two-and-a-half years, and I encourage consumers to do the same”.

Asked whether Ms Haigh was right to call for a boycott of the firm, which she called a “rogue operator”, Sir Keir said: “Well, that’s not the view of the [Government](#).”

Asked about the DP World situation, Sir Keir told the BBC’s Newscast: “Well, look, I think we’ll resolve that.

“But... I think if you look at the last three or four weeks, you’ve seen £40-plus billion worth of investment.”

Once the Employment Rights Act goes through Parliament, there’ll be a very clear framework for the way in which we expect companies to behave and that is going to bite on companies like P&O

Liam Byrne

Mr Byrne, chairman of the House of Commons’ Business and Trade Committee, told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme: “I think there’s a bit of a split here between the past and the future. So look, Lou Haigh was absolutely right to say that the behaviour of P&O, owned by DP World, in the past has been completely unacceptable.”

P&O chief executive Peter Hebblethwaite told the committee he could not live on what he paid his workers and that his pay package was around £750,000, Mr Byrne said.

“That is the kind of behaviour that we can’t have in this country,” he said.

Mr Byrne added: “Once the Employment Rights Act goes through

Parliament, there'll be a very clear framework for the way in which we expect companies to behave and that is going to bite on companies like P&O."

Monday's high-profile investment summit will be used by the Government as a chance to champion firms who have already committed billions of pounds to the UK and attempt to woo others who are considering new deals.

"The message, I think, that is going to go from the summit is really clear that if you want to come and do business here, you can't behave in the way that P&O has in the past.

"And I think the Prime Minister was expressing that confidence in the way in which DP World is going to run their shop," Mr Byrne said.