

Construction electricians Two months on - national strike action needed

Rob Williams
Chair, National Shop Stewards
Network (NSSN)

Rank and file electricians in the construction industry have been meeting in Scotland, Manchester and now London over the last two weeks as their magnificent campaign of defiance enters its second month. After a tremendous series of protests, meetings, rallies and most notably walkouts at West Burton and Saltend, workers will be debating the next stage of defending the Joint Industry Board (JIB) agreement that seven of the biggest construction companies want to withdraw from.

These companies want to impose new contracts, which will mean many electricians losing up to 35% of their pay as well as having other terms and conditions attacked.

The response from thousands of these workers has been incredible. Initially, with little support from Unite, the action has been organised by a handful of union activists, many of them blacklisted.

Already one of the original 'Big 8' construction employers, MJN Coulston, has stepped back from withdrawing from the JIB.

The pressure from this campaign has moved Unite into action, with full-time officials now present on the protests. Unite's official involvement has raised confidence but now these workers will want the union to act with a sense of urgency. At



Young construction workers fight for their rights photo Paul Mattsson

the Farringdon protest in London, Unite assistant general secretary Gail Cartmail promised a strike ballot but that was three weeks ago!

A national ballot of all electricians working for the seven companies should be organised immediately. Even a ballot at one of the companies would be a step forward, which would focus the national campaign. Whatever happens, rather than going to a different site every week, one of the sites of the now 'Big 7' could be targeted.

Whether there is an official ballot or not, this could give the electricians on the targeted site the con-

fidence to walk out with a view to spread this action nationally. This would increase the pressure on the Unite officials.

The successful dispute at Lindsey Oil Refinery in 2009 showed that if the numbers are there, even if the union officials deliberately drag their feet, unofficial action spreading to other sites nationally can defeat the employers' plans.

See the Socialist Party www.socialistparty.org.uk and NSSN websites www.shopstewards.net for up to the minute reports of protests. Send your reports and views to editors@socialistparty.org.uk

Ratcliffe power station

A protest by around 100 construction electricians at Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station in Notts on 7 October had a big impact.

Ratcliffe was chosen as one of the contractors there, SPIE, is among the seven firms who want to tear up their agreed JIB conditions.

I spoke to some of the workers, Unite members, involved:

"There are seven companies who want to pull out of the JIB, they want to introduce a lower grade for electricians to do our work. It could put skilled workers out of work, or we accept a big pay cut. But this will affect lots of other workers, not just electricians."

"These young lads have been told over years if you get these qualifications, taking lower pay while you serve your time, you will get decent pay in the end. Now they are being told that these are not worth the paper they are written on and anyone can do your job. Like typical capitalists they want to make money by taking it out of your pocket. If I was to do that I would be arrested!"

We travel all over the country, working long hours. Now they won't even give you a tea break!

These companies are not doing it because they aren't making profits. They want to cut the pay in advance of new contracts that are in the pipeline. This is a rolling tour of protests and we won't stop until we win."

Steve Score

Printers sacked as bosses make a million

Unite members at printers Wyndeham Impact in Basingstoke protested outside the closed factory on 7 October to continue the fight for their jobs, unpaid wages, holiday pay, sick pay and the previous sacking of two printers. They were joined by supporters from the area, including NSSN chair Rob Williams.

The sacking of 60 printers by Wyndeham Impact shows the ruthless outlook of the bosses in their goal to feed their profit driven business. Skilled workers who have given decades of work have been treated like dirt. It is a stark warning to working people and the trade unions of what to expect as employers attempt to squeeze every ounce of profit out of workers. Longer hours and lower pay is their gospel unless the unions take the necessary steps to fight back.

Once again, like workers in the public sector such as those at Southampton City council, legally binding contracts are shown to be worthless bits of paper, as the bosses tear up agreements.

Unite members have mounted a determined and courageous campaign for what was rightfully theirs. Over 24 weeks of industrial action, including weekly strikes, they have stood together on the picket line, the only means left to force the employers to adhere to the agreements that had been signed.

On Friday 30 September, workers were shocked at the news that Wyndeham Impact was closing. Nothing had been said to the union either to

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officials or to reps at Impact. Management phoned workers telling them not to come in.

One worker was notified by his wife, who phoned him after getting a message from the company on their answer-phone at home.

Wyndeham bosses have torn up every agreement with the union, sending them down the road with statutory redundancy to be paid over 12 months. Unite says this is illegal and will take Impact to court.

Through a one-year pay cut of 13% from 2009, workers lost thousands of pounds which went into the pockets of Impact. They were forced to work bank holidays then given final written warnings for working to their contracts. Workers had to take the company to court to claim sick pay, only to be paid on the day before the hearing.

The onslaught on workers across the public and private sector needs to be met with the full force of the trade unions. The 30 November public sector strike will be a step towards this.

'We have not gone away' say Soton council workers

Nick Chaffey

Thursday 6 October saw the latest strike action by Southampton City council workers. Unite called out its 700 members across the city in solidarity with 250 Unison care workers. Mass pickets showed continued support for the fight to defend the contracts torn up by Tory councillors.

"We've not gone away!" was the message on the picket line. Council workers have showed steely determination to sustain months of strike action and a work to rule. This action has been fuelled by a burning anger at the hypocrisy of councillors who vote for their own pay rises while cutting the pay of those delivering frontline services. How this system rewards the hangman!

Hundreds marched and rallied in Guildhall Square to chants of, "Cut my pay? No Way! Same old Tories, lying Tories!" All the hot air that pay cuts would 'save jobs' is clearly now seen as a Tory lie as plans are made to cut hundreds of jobs.

One of the bin depot picket line stalwarts said to me: "We have shown every council in this country what they can expect if they try to attack our pay and conditions. I think we are playing our part in showing the way to fight back!"

Loud cheers were given as messages of support were read out from RMT general secretary Bob Crow and PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka. As the 30 November united pensions strike looms, there is a sense of a growing battle devel-



Marching on 6 October photo Nick Chaffey

oping. Public support for the strike remains strong with the finger of blame pointing at the council and the government.

The Socialist Party has continued to argue that to win the dispute, strike action needs to involve the whole council and the campaign needs to be linked to the community who are seeing their services cut. Every trade union member in the city, public or private, is a ripped off council tax payer. They should be given a chance to register their solidarity for the council workers.

A Saturday demonstration called by the council unions could show the strikers the support they have and show the Tories the opposition they have fuelled.

The prospect of defeating the Tories in the elections next May is undoubtedly a relished goal. But increasingly workers are clear that Labour offers no alternative. It is vital that support for a clear political alternative to the cuts is built.

Fast news

Pensions

The National Pensioners Convention is launching a Rights in Retirement campaign week from 24 to 29 October 2011. We are demanding three basic rights in retirement: the right to a decent state pension set at £178 a week, the right to be cared for in dignity and respect, as well as a warm home.

The fight of public sector workers to defend their pension is the same fight being waged by retired workers to defend their state pension. The NPC calls for a winter fuel allowance of £500 per household as well as the right to be cared for whether in the NHS or in the community, with costs shared by society as a whole.

As part of the campaign there will be a national rally/lobby of Parliament on 26 October, 1-3pm. In the build-up to 30 November it is vital we unite all sections of the working class behind the strikers, this includes pensioners, many of whom are being hit hard by the government's austerity programme.

Terry Pearce
National Pensioners Convention (NPC) - Thames Valley, personal capacity

Jobcentre Plus

Lincoln Benefit Centre, along with 41 other Jobcentre Plus offices across the UK, is under threat of closure. The closure of this site will represent the loss of the last benefit processing facilities in the county of Lincolnshire. Over 130 people work there, scores will be forced to transfer to Lincoln Contact Centre.

A march against the closure was held on 24 September. PCS reps came over from other threatened offices in the East Midlands and the North West to support the event.

Our PCS branch is committed to opposing the closure of Lincoln Benefit Centre and demands a well-staffed public welfare service with secure, permanent jobs for all staff.

Nick Parker,
Assistant Secretary,
PCS DWP Lincolnshire and Rutland Branch

Barnsley college

Scores of lecturers' union UCU members at Barnsley College, with students in support, picketed entrances as they took strike action on 6 October. This was in defence of Graham Mustin, their joint branch secretary who after over 20 years of teaching at the college is being made redundant on 21 November, despite vacancies existing that he could have been redeployed to.

This strike follows on from several days of strike action earlier in the year against job cuts at the college, with over 50 staff forced into voluntary redundancy with a prospect of returning to work at college on inferior terms and conditions. The mood of the staff on strike was one of anger and determination. The mood was lifted as several college students went round visiting picket lines with a large banner emblazoned "Students support their lecturers".

There was a fantastic response when we gave out leaflets about the Jarrow March arriving in Barnsley on 11 October, with several pickets saying they had already heard about it and were planning on coming along to support it.

Iain Dalton
Yorkshire organiser, Youth Fight for Jobs