

Construction electricians Protests in London, North West, Newcastle

Rob Williams

On 12 October up to 400 electricians and other workers from the construction industry along with fellow trade unionists and students held an impromptu march in central London from the Tate Modern to the Balfour Beatty site at Blackfriars as part of their struggle against the employers' plans to cut their wages by up to 35%.

The police were trying to play catch-up as the demonstrators marched over the Millennium Bridge, then stopped in the road outside St Paul's cathedral before heading to the Blackfriars site.

For two months, rank and file electricians have been building a campaign of protests and walkouts to stop the 'Big 8' construction employers withdrawing from the Joint Industry Board (JIB) national agreements.

Such has been the effectiveness of the campaign that it's now down to the 'Dirty Seven' as MJN Coulston has backed off.

Worse contracts

But it still means that thousands of electricians are facing 90-day notices to put them on the new BESNA terms and conditions which will open the way for worse contracts.

Balfour Beatty alone has put over 1,600 workers in this corner. The deadline for them is 7 December so no more time must be lost.

At a 200-strong Unite open meeting in Conway Hall in London on 11 October electricians heaped more pressure on Unite officials who have promised a strike ballot against the employers.

In the end, Unite assistant general secretary Gail Cartmail promised to serve the notice as soon as possible: "Read my lips, we will support you"

Workers welcome Unite coming on board but they recognise that a sense of urgency has to be injected into the battle.

Preferably all the companies must be served notice of a ballot urgently but even if say Balfour Beatty work-



Time to concentrate the action on one site photo Paul Mattsson

ers were balloted, it would mean their sites would be picketed and would be the focus for action that could be spread nationally.

It would send a strong message to them and the other employers that the battle is on. The consensus from the meeting and the Blackfriars protest was that there should be a slight change to the tactics.

While protesting outside different sites every week has spread the word to thousands of workers about the bosses' attacks, it is now time to concentrate on one site to see if action can be built - official

or unofficial.

On 19 October, we will be where we started seven weeks ago, at Blackfriars.

Union activists need to get on the site, discussing with the electricians to convince them that if we fight, we can defeat the employers.

There was also a call from the meeting and protest that whatever happens with the ballot, there should be a national walkout of all construction workers on 30 November to join with the public sector strike to defend pensions.

North West

All electrical work stopped for the day at Balfour's Carrington paper mill site in Greater Manchester, as protests in the north west hit a new level. Around 100 sparks from across the region, together with two from Newcastle and two from Nottingham, protested outside the turnstiles.

Despite numerous threats of sacking and victimisation, especially from Balfour, the protest drew a tremendous response from sparks on site. Many stayed away for the day. Four van-loads from Taylors spoke to protesters and then turned round and drove away.

This is the first large-scale stoppage in the region, following action by a smaller number on the Liverpool central library site.

Steve Acheson, Unite branch secretary and north west member of the national steering committee, told me: "The private security met us first thing when we got here, they said we're not allowed to protest outside the turnstiles because it's a private entrance.

"They wanted us to move down to the road. But the police came and, as before, they agreed it's OK for us to protest where we are.

"Today is a brilliant result, with a great response from all the electrical personnel on the site, and this is despite widespread threats of getting the sack for lads who didn't turn into work today!"

"All the personnel are quite rightly fired up by this savage attack by Balfour's who are slashing our living standards with this 35% pay cut. This is just the first of many more protests."

Hugh Caffrey

Protesting in the rain in Newcastle

In Newcastle on 12 October, in torrential rain, around 40 electricians protested at the Walkergate Medical Centre.

Prior to the protest a Unite officer had been reported as telling workers that the advice of the union was not to sign the new agreement but if people refused and were sacked the

union would be unable to help!

One of the protesters told us: "It's becoming clear that the union isn't backing us. If ever there's been a time for unofficial action - now is that time!"

Although most of the electricians who spoke to us were Unite members, some had left the union, as

they were scornful of the lack of a fight from the union.

However, it was clear that if Unite were to be seen as putting forward a clear fighting strategy, there would be a flood of members back into the union.

Passing school students waved and clapped at the protesters, some

of them managing to get hold of Unite banners, which they marched off with on their way to school.

At the end of the protest the construction workers held a brief meeting where they agreed that the unofficial action needed to be escalated.

Elaine Brunskill, Newcastle Socialist Party

Save our jobs, save Remploy factories

Mariam Kamish

On 14 October, over 40 workers from the Remploy factories in Porth, Abertillery and Aberdare attended a public meeting along with 20 of their supporters to build the campaign to fight the Con-Dem government's closure programme.

In a lively meeting, Remploy workers spoke from the floor and showed their anger and their determination to fight. "They'll never

get me to accept redundancy," said Jeff Hollinshead, plant convenor. "We don't own these jobs. They aren't ours to sell; we are just looking after them for those who come after us."

One worker said: "For a lot of people in this factory, this is more than just a job. It's their whole social life. Without this factory, they'd be lost."

Another explained that 95% of the 2,000 Remploy workers who lost their jobs in 2008 are still out of

work. He said: "They want to replace a £21,000 a year job with a few hours stacking shelves in ASDA - and that would be for the lucky ones."

Les Woodward, Remploy national trade union convenor, is based at the Swansea plant.

Les welcomed suggestions that the Welsh government could put procurement work into the Remploy factories.

But he warned against any attempts to save the eight plants in Wales by sacrificing the other 46.

"We can win this fight," he said, "but we need unity to do that."

Socialist Party members intend to build support through the anti-cuts campaigns and the NSSN. They will discuss with members of PCS, Unison, the RMT and other unions the potential for campaigning for procurement in their sectors to go to Remploy plants.

On 30 November, Remploy workers will be on the trade union demonstrations and all trade unionists need to give them their support.

Fast news

TV license strike

About 50-60 TV licensing workers in Bristol, members of the CWU, gathered from various picket lines for a short rally to mark the first day of their strike on 17 October. They are fighting for a decent pay increase after their employer, Capita, have offered them only 2.6% this year. The cost of living is rising at almost double this rate and this deal comes on the back of a two-year pay freeze.

The company claim this is all they can afford but as angry workers pointed out they make £1 million profit daily and bosses recently awarded themselves £5,000 each. Companies like Capita that specialise in winning contracts for privatised public services are actually looking forward to an even bigger bonanza thanks to the government's austerity drive. They're only able to make these huge profits off the back of driving down workers' terms and conditions. Everyone I spoke to was clear that if bosses didn't budge after this first day of action then there would be more.

Tom Baldwin

West Mids NSSN

Around 30 trade unionists attended the West Midlands conference of the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) in Birmingham on 15 October. It marked another positive step forward for the NSSN.

The first discussion of the day heard introductions from Rob Williams, chair of the Network, and Sian Ruddick chair of the PCS in the Midlands. Both speakers outlined the current situation, with unions gearing up to take action on 30 November.

After that discussion there were two workshop sessions - one on strengthening unions where they already exist, and the other on building unions where there are none. These were excellent discussions - activists from the shop floor exchanging ideas, experiences and practical advice on organising. The final session was on building the NSSN for the battles ahead. A delegation of Unite members from Remploy in Staffordshire formally thanked the NSSN for the support they have received.

Socialist Party reporters

Sotheby's

The international class struggle hit one of the more exclusive parts of London's West End on 13 October when professional art handlers at auction house Sotheby's sale-rooms in New York, members of the Teamsters union, took their protests to the London contemporary art auction.

Jason Ide, president of Teamsters Local 814 in New York said to the Socialist: "Despite record profits and growth, Sotheby's locked out all of their art handlers when they refused to accept worsened contracts. We have been locked out for two and a half months when we refused to accept an extra 30 minutes on the working day, reduction in overtime rates, the introduction of a 'permanent' class of temporary workers and having to train these new workers to do their jobs!" Jason said they will continue their protests outside Sotheby's events wherever they happen around the world.

Kevin Parslow