

Construction electricians Start the strike ballot now!

Rob Williams

On 19 October the construction electricians' protest at Blackfriars Balfour Beatty site began in full darkness at 6.30am. Despite the chilly weather the struggle between electricians and the 'big seven' electrical contractors rages on as hot as ever.

These companies want to withdraw from the Joint Industry Board (JIB) national agreement. Balfour Beatty has been targeted because over 1,600 of their electricians have been given notice that the new inferior BESNA contracts will be imposed on them. This could mean a 35% pay cut.

At the protest, Unite officials announced that the union will be serving notice of a strike ballot against the company. The Socialist Party welcomes this move but there must be no further delay.

It means that at all future protests, workers on the sites balloted must continue to be approached with a friendly attitude and encouraged to join the campaign - firstly joining the union if they're not already members, then taking leaflets onto sites. The campaign must be for workers to join the protests and of course vote 'yes' in the ballot.

We also welcome Unite's decision to call a national demonstration on 9 November. This could be a big



Protesting at the Blackfriars station site photo Paul Mattsson

march of all construction workers in London and could cause a national stoppage in the industry. It should link up with the student demonstration the same day. We also encourage all construction workers to support the Youth Fight for Jobs March from Jarrow and to come on 5 November when it finishes in London.

There will be another protest at

Blackfriars on 26 October.

Manchester

In Manchester on 19 October dozens of electricians protested at the NG Baileys town hall site. The protest was buoyed by news of the 9 November day of action, and that Unite will be balloting specific Balfour Beatty sites.

The protest on 26 October returns to the Balfour's Carrington paper mill site, where last week all electrical work was halted for a day. Unite should give full support to the Carrington protest, mobilising across the north-west for the biggest possible turnout and providing union campaign resources on the day.

Hugh Caffrey

Re-instate Vik Chechi Oppose victimisation of trade union activist

Maggie Potts

Messages of support and complaints to management have flooded in following the shock announcement last week that Vik Chechi, the Unison branch secretary of Queen Mary University in east London, was suspended by his employer.

In the few months Vik has been Unison branch secretary, he and

other Unison members have re-invigorated the union branch. Union membership has increased, members have turned to Vik for support and representation, and the branch is campaigning against cuts.

Over 100 staff are threatened with redundancy, including 26 in libraries and 43 in medicine and dentistry. The Unison branch has played a leading part in the anti-cuts campaign on campus, uniting

students and staff.

Individual Unison members have been horrified at this attack, believing that this is an attempt to prevent the union from fighting effectively against the cuts. If management is successful it will leave staff and students open to bigger attacks in the future. The QM UCU (lecturers' union) branch has pledged full support and many students have come forward to offer

to help in any way they can.

The Unison branch committee is holding a meeting of all members to make sure there is maximum involvement of members in any campaign.

• Please continue to send in protests to Vik's employers demanding his immediate reinstatement - Queen Mary University c.pearson@qmul.ac.uk and f.balkwill@qmul.ac.uk. Send copies to info@shop-stewards.net

Tax dodging continues while staff face cuts

Big business and the wealthy manipulate loopholes in the system to avoid and evade paying an estimated £120 billion a year in tax. The PCS union's alternative to the cuts demands investment in jobs and services to pay the UK's debt and aid economic recovery, rather than allowing parasitic tax dodgers to avoid paying their fair share.

Despite this, the government is ploughing ahead with up to 10,000 job cuts in the revenue and customs department (HMRC) by 2015, including closing a number of offices across the UK and bringing the private sector into its call centre network.

PCS members in HMRC are angry about the number of attacks facing them. New policies introduced to reduce sickness levels are being abused by local managers to discipline staff, raising alarming concerns about the treatment of disabled staff and those with underlying health problems.

Cuts to the civil service compensation scheme, which determines the level of redundancy/early release payouts, will force many out the door early. It is now more attractive financially to take voluntary re-

dundancy. Management hope this will make it easier to close offices.

PCS has a good record in fighting office closures and will oppose and campaign against losing a vital service. PCS national policy states that if one member is made compulsorily redundant then that would trigger a ballot for national action.

PCS in HMRC are also fighting back in call centres. A ballot for industrial action in call centres is underway.

HMRC are inviting private companies to run a 12 month 'trial' in January to help reduce call handling waiting times. Scandalously, they will allow private companies the use of HMRC premises and equipment to carry this out - they will also employ around 100 of their 'own' staff, no doubt on the minimum wage and on bad conditions. It's likely these private companies will be non-unionised, giving the department the opportunity to pose a race to the bottom between civil servants and private sector colleagues.

Not to mention the data security implications on giving private companies access to personal tax information.

HMRC has no need to bring in the private sector. Over 1,000 temporary



PCS members will fight the job cuts photo Paul Mattsson

workers who have been employed and fully trained up by experienced staff over the past 12 months could be given permanent jobs to help increase customer service in the long term.

Our ballot for industrial action and action short of strike began on 27 October. Members will be involved in organising two hour walkouts every fortnight during busy periods and will work to rule. This

will begin at the end of November following the ballot result, due 17 November. This will hit the business hard while reducing the financial impact on members' pockets in the run up to further national action.

Tracy Edwards
PCS industrial officer, personal capacity
Thelma Snelgrove
PCS rep HMRC Thames Valley branch

In brief

30 November strike

Unite members are now being balloted for strike action on 30 November. They will be joining one of the biggest strikes in modern British history.

On 25 October, Unite went to the High Court with five other public sector unions with a judicial review challenging the government's 15% cut in existing public sector pensions. This is because of their decision to move from using the Retail Price Index to the lower Consumer Price Index when calculating the annual increase in pension rates.

Southampton council



As we go to press, a new pay offer has been made by Southampton city council. Following the latest strike of Southampton council workers, talks with the council have produced an offer which will be put to a ballot of Unison and Unite members. A mass meeting has been organised to discuss the latest proposal. In the meantime strike action has been suspended. Southampton council workers have shown tremendous determination to sustain a prolonged battle to defend their contracts. It has served notice on Southampton councillors, Tory, Lib Dem and New Labour, as well as all local authorities around the country about what they can expect if attacks are made on pay, terms and conditions.

Enormous anger remains at the savage cuts to pay and the prospects of massive job cuts in the next council budget. It remains to be seen whether this latest concession will be sufficient to settle the dispute.

As national strike action looms on pensions, this could be a significant opportunity to intensify the pressure on the council and give confidence to all Southampton council workers that these pay cuts can be defeated.

Nick Chaffey
Southampton Socialist Party

Coventry council

Workers at Coventry City Council lobbied councillors on 18 October to demand a £250 payment that had been promised to all public sector employees earning under £21,000. The council have budgeted for this increase, but are refusing to pay.

Unions have collected hundreds of signatures demanding the council pays its staff. Socialist Party councillor Dave Nellist presented the petition.

The response from other councillors was disgraceful. When quizzed by council workers, the majority of our public representatives claimed they had no idea what we were talking about.

Unions now need to continue the campaign for the £250 payment - continued lobbying of councillors, linking up with the wider public and trade union movement to pile the pressure on. There should also be discussion about how this links in to the fight for decent pay, pensions and the defence of jobs.

A Unison member