

# Defending building workers' rights

## An interview with Mick Dooley

The election for the general secretary of the building workers' union Ucat starts on 11 November. This election has been called after the 2009 general secretary election was found to be illegal. Then, one of the candidates, Mick Dooley, made a complaint

after he found that 70,000 members of the union had been denied the right to ballot. Now the Ucat leadership has barred Mick from standing in the current elections. Apparently he has been told he is "not competent", although clearly many Ucat

members do not agree because 30 Ucat branches have nominated him. He is now looking into the possibility of legal action.

Before he was banned from the election, Mick spoke to Bob Severn.

There was no provision within the rulebook to raise this complaint [in 2009] so we had to take it externally. I was unhappy with the way the union was being run and the actions of the existing general secretary, Alan Ritchie.

That ballot was found to be illegal and Alan Ritchie was removed. A new election was called but the union leadership appealed against this and they lost the appeal. Subsequently there was an investigation into the finances of the union. Since March Alan Ritchie has been suspended as part of that investigation.

I had worked for the TUC and Ucat for 12 years with a completely unblemished record but I was dismissed as a full-time union official after five investigations into my conduct. I'm still awaiting the outcome of the employment tribunal.

### How do you think the union should organise on the sites?

In Ucat a policy decision was made that the union should work with the employers to put convenors and union reps on sites. I disagree with this.

The workers themselves started to organise and elect shop stewards. But for a number of years that hasn't been happening and convenors have been appointed. This is one of the symptoms of the malady of the trade unions in construction. But three of the candidates I'm up against in the election went along with this position.

The ideal position is to get out there and start showing to the workers on building sites that you will be standing shoulder to shoulder with them. That you will back them up come hell or high water and that you're going to put everything into organising workers on site level.

When you do that and you give them confidence, you will get some victories. Then they can elect their own shop stewards or support whoever is leading the struggle.

The formal structures in most workplaces don't always work on building sites. I'm conscious of the blacklisting and the casualisation of the industry and its transient nature. A formal structure of shop stewards, convenors committees, etc is not going to be the way forward in the short term, until we start getting some organisation onto the sites. So the tactics I'll be using will not be the formal methods which the employers and other trade unions will be familiar with.

The sites are spread out but we can develop communications. We can have meetings and forums away from the sites. We can identify individual trade groups where we can get known.

### What are the main issues facing building workers today?

Casualisation, self-employment, bullying, lack of holiday pay, poor conditions and safety. The main issue is wages. My main priority is getting organised so we can get as much money as we can into the hands of the workers.

### What about Ucat members in the public sector?

Because of the cuts in the public

sector, the terms and conditions of Ucat members are being eroded. But when you allow that to happen the employers just come back for more. So the best bet is to fight tooth and nail wherever you can.

Construction workers in the public sector are facing privatisation, outsourcing, the erosion of terms and conditions and agency labour. And I've not seen any massive challenge against those things. My position would be to take each council and each depot and start to win it back. The strike on 30 November can be a way of beginning to strengthen the union in the workplaces. That way we can start reversing this. Privatisation is not written in stone. You can change the way things turn out.

### How can you change things?

It will be difficult but we need to build up our muscle and profile in the construction industry as a whole. We have to be seen as tough negotiators and a union that's efficient and organised and can cause economic disruption to the employers' strategy.

Anybody looking for wage cuts will look for the weakest link first. Building workers are in a weak position now and I would like to change that. If every union started to do that, the workers will stop being the weakest link.

I would say to every Ucat member, if you are happy with the way the union is being run and your pay and conditions, vote for another candidate. If you want things to change, vote for me.

### Why did you read a passage from the Ragged Trousered Philanthropists at one of the construction workers' protests recently?

The book means a lot to me and the part I read was where the employer was trying to cut wages because there was a downturn in work, even though there was an agreed local rate. Then workers would sometimes go without food rather than work below the going rate. They would see their children impoverished and not be able to pay the rent for weeks on end. This is building workers' history.

The same employers today would have you in that position if they could get away with it. "You can take it or leave it", that's what the employers are saying today. Until the trade unions got organised they had to take it but we don't have to take it now. We've got the communication and the organisation, all we lack is the confidence and the will to do what is necessary.

### What is your background as a union activist?

I am a bricklayer by trade but I studied law, not to be a lawyer but because representing workers on the sites, I kept coming up against the law. Also I found how inept full-time trade union officials could be. I felt I had to be trained adequately if I was to advise, lead and support other workers.

I was always active in the union but in the 1990s, in a big recession, we found the building workers' union wasn't what it should be. So we



Mick Dooley at a protest at Kings Cross station - with The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists photo Paul Mattsson

formed the Joint Sites Committee as an informal rank and file group. We had some great successes. But you can only take it so far because you have to earn a living.

The full-time officials weren't coming forward to organise. Like in the miners' strike it was the troops on the ground who did the business.

My history has always been of fighting back so that's why I got blacklisted

by the employers. If the employers don't want me - that's a good enough reason for electing me.

We're below zero in terms of organisation in the construction industry. We need to close the gap between the unions and the workers who don't even know what trade unions are. If the union is seen as a large organisation, nothing to do with the workplace, with people

who are well-fed and well-dressed, that has to change. That's why I'll only be taking the average workers' wage.

The rest of the money should be used to support workers in struggle throughout the world. Like the trade unionists imprisoned in Colombia, we must not let their families starve. That's solidarity, building up important links between workers.

## "All power to the sparks!"

Construction workers continued their action against pay cuts on 26 October. In London they met at the Balfour Beatty site at Blackfriars station. And in Manchester, electrical work at Carington paper mill ground to a halt on the Balfour job. Five vans of workers again refused to pass the protest and numerous other vehicles were turned away after a discussion with protesters about the pay cuts.

The national demonstration called by Unite for 9 November will be useful in so far as it is a lever to mass strike action, through a huge show of strength to workers and employers.

The workers will be holding protests on 2 November at the same sites before the national demo.

The Socialist Party has argued for an official strike ballot at the soonest possible date, while explaining that unofficial action from below will also be crucial to defeating the employers.

The ballot at Balfours (BBES) runs from 14-28 November with the first date of strike action on 7 December, the day on which the seven main employers intend to impose the new pay-slashing contracts.

Workers will be encouraged



Protesting in London on 26 October photo Paul Mattsson

and emboldened by the fact that Unite is balloting, but there is a real danger that this is too little too late.

If or when the employers legally challenge the strike ballot, Unite could be prevented by the anti-union laws from legally and officially striking before the contracts are imposed.

Rank and file protests have pointed the way forward at each stage despite weeks of prevarication and hostility from the Unite bureaucracy over the summer.

While in recent weeks, top Unite officials have said many fine words

at London protests, there's little or no sign of them on the ground elsewhere.

There needs to be a serious discussion about whether the ballot can be brought forward. And above all, strike action is needed across as many sites as possible at the earliest possible date, whether that is 7 November or on 30 November when most public-sector unions intend to strike.

The employers are not in a strong position and can be compelled to retreat if decisive action is built, from above and especially from below.