

the★commune

for workers' self-management and communism from below

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migrant workers are at the heart of our fightback!

editorial of *The Commune*

It is no accident that this issue of *The Commune* features a number of articles on the struggles of immigrants, in particular migrant workers trying to organise. The jobs massacre currently taking place under the cover of recession is an attack which particularly endangers casually or precariously employed workers; furthermore, migrants are also being scapegoated for 'stealing' hard-to-come-by jobs.

Immigrants, many of whom are forced to leave their countries of birth by repressive regimes directly or indirectly put in place with a helping hand from British foreign policy, are expected to work long hours at low pay on casual contracts: and most of all, not to complain.

However, brave organising efforts have been mounted by many migrant workers to stand up to employers and demand basic rights: for example cleaners at university campuses or banks in the City of London demanding a living wage rather than just the legal minimum and fighting against redundancies. They are an example to the entire labour movement of how to fight back: they show the possibility of building working-class resistance to the recession. Yet as the 'Justice for Cleaners' episode shows (page 7) unions like Unite are indifferent, or even hostile, to migrant workers. This despite the fact that for many migrants, raising your head above the parapet risks determined efforts by employers and the state to question your 'right' to live in the UK and therefore to weed-out troublemakers and organisers.

Recent liberal calls for an 'amnesty' offering 'a pathway to citizenship' for 'hard-working' illegal immigrants do not challenge this, since business interests and the state still decide who is 'suitable' for entry. The use of border controls to de-

termine who may or may not live in the UK is an affront to any notion of democratic rights of the individual, and is also intimately linked with the racist idea that where you come from should determine whether you are allowed to choose to live here. Such border controls are also highly gendered, with women bearing the brunt of deportations and violence perpetrated by immigration officials.

Those who argue that migrants should not be allowed into the UK 'for their own protection', to stop them being exploited by unscrupulous employers, ignore the fact that hundreds of thousands of people work in the UK illegally regardless: in fact their status simply means that they are denied basic employment rights; subjected to practices such as the non-payment of wages; and are in constant fear that their already precarious work status will be swept from under them. Borders, detention centres and deportations are a savage weapon in the hands of the bosses to control people.

Capitalism needs to move the workforce around at its whim in order to mobilise it efficiently, much as the EU Posted Workers' Directive has allowed bosses to 'undercut', breaking union and minimum wage agreements: the best way to fight this exploitation is not to retreat into protectionism, but rather to demand full freedom of movement and equal work conditions for all, regardless of any form of national discrimination.

As communists we are for a world without any borders or states. Opposition to all immigration controls is fundamental to the free society we envisage and the fight to build it starts now. We do not believe it to be some 'optional extra' to be neglected as it was by recent left electoral projects from Respect to No2EU. All workers have a common enemy in these racist, sexist, union-busting immigration controls.

workers fight motor meltdown

by Adam Ford

The recent reinstatement of union convenor Rob Williams by his bosses at the Linamar car parts factory is a welcome victory for the Swansea workers, as well as all those who expressed their solidarity. Amongst the celebrations, however, caution is needed. Linamar are likely preparing a counter-attack, and this is just one front in a global war on car workers' conditions.

Linamar sacked Williams on April 28th. According to the company, there had been an "irretrievable breakdown of trust".

The company's use of the word 'trust' - even though it had apparently broken down - is instructive. It pretends that there is some common interest between capitalists and the workers whose labour they exploit. For this reason, a modern boss expects to 'trust' the onsite representative of the workforce - i.e. be able to tell that rep they intend to make an attack on pay, jobs or working conditions, then expect that rep to meekly accept it. This top-down pyramid of power leaves no room for workers having the slightest say on matters that shape their lives.

By all accounts, Linamar had good reason not to trust Williams, a dedicated class fighter. In the weeks running up to his sacking, he had shown support to sacked Visteon workers occupying factories in Belfast, London and Essex. This solidarity with people in active resistance must have frightened Williams' bosses, for two reasons. Firstly, like Linamar, Visteon is a company with strong links to Ford (indeed Visteon sold the Swansea site to Linamar last July). Secondly, as the recession takes hold and car sales plummet, Linamar Group President Brian Wade intends to attack wages and conditions at Swansea.

In the month between the May 6th confirmation of his sacking and Linamar's concession, Williams told rallies about talks between Wade and Tony Woodley, joint general secretary of the Unite union. According to Williams, Wade spoke of 'buying down' - i.e. worsening contracts - in return for a one-off 'sweetener'. Though no further details are available in this case, union tops around the world have regularly responded favourably to such deals/ultimatums over the past few decades, and especially since this catastrophic economic collapse began. Like the corporate bosses, they have a parasitical relationship with 'their' workers, living off union dues rather than unpaid surplus labour.

Linamar finally reinstated Williams on June 10th, with just hours to spare before an indefinite strike was set to begin. The ballot for strike action had passed by 139 to 19, on a turnout of over 90 percent. Woodley then took a week to name the first strike date. It is not possible to know what



korean car giant ssangyong has seen a month-long factory occupation after cutting 36% of its workers

happened behind the scenes, but we can examine the social pressures involved.

Linamar want to attack pay and conditions. Linamar workers want to defend what they have. Tony Woodley, as a union bureaucrat, wants to keep as many union members as possible, and has the power to negotiate sacrifices 'on behalf of' those he must force to swallow the bitterness, albeit with a 'sweetener'.

The Linamar standoff is only a small part of a bosses' onslaught against car workers. With UK sales down a quarter in May compared to a year ago, and similar figures throughout the wealthiest nations, the 'Big Three' companies - General Motors, Chrysler and Ford - are in real financial trouble, and are making ferocious cutbacks. This has provoked preliminary worker resistance in many countries, and this will only intensify when more dodgy deals are struck over the coming months.

As a globalised economy crashes, international labour struggles are coming. It promises to be an exciting time, as well as a time of hardship for workers in struggle. Such workers must find allies amongst their counterparts, wherever they live on the planet, because ultimately they won't find them in union headquarters.

The global crisis, caused by the chaos and calculated insanity of capitalism, requires a global working class response.

building from below: the case of northampton sos

by Dave Spencer

The Socialist Workers Party's call for Left Unity for the 2010 General Election should come with a 'serious health warning' attached to it. On February 5th 2005 the SWP used its majority to close down the Socialist Alliance, which involved a number of different left groups and individuals. They closed it down to establish their own, more loyal front organisation, Respect. And we all know what happened to Respect!

At the same time the SWP helped to organise the demoralising split in the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). They had "a platform" inside the SSP and encouraged Tommy Sheridan to break the broad and brave alliance of the SSP. Why? Because the SWP cannot stand rival organisations.

In the 2001 General Election the Socialist Alliance fielded 98 candidates in England and Wales and gained 1.69% of the total vote. In Scotland the SSP fielded 72 candidates and gained 3.36% of the total vote. Both sets of candidates beat Arthur Scargill's Socialist Labour Party. These are better results than No2EU in the recent EU Elections and, remember, we are now in an economic recession.

Imagine building on that 2001 result. Well, one former Socialist Alliance branch did precisely that. Northampton comrades have been campaigning consistently to defend the public services in their area. In this year's County Council elections they stood three candidates on a Save Our Services platform. Dave Green in New Duston ward gained 950 votes, 39.6% of the total votes and came second by 60 votes to the sitting Tory councillor. Harry Tuttle in Lumberbush ward got 16.5% of the total vote and Norman Adams in Delapre ward got 10.3% of the vote.

Of course we should not believe that votes are everything and that we can change the world by winning council or parliamentary seats. But it gives us an opportunity to get a hearing from the working class, provided that we have done the consistent campaigning along the way. The calls for unity at the last minute before an election are rather like the method of Joshua before the Battle of Jericho. March round and round working class communities without getting involved and then throw in a leaflet at the last minute and expect the walls to come tumbling down. Joshua's victory depended on a miracle - the SWP will need one too.

The SWP has form. They sabotage broad organisations they cannot control and they are renowned for undemocratic practices. It is not sectarian to say this; it is they who are the sectarians. Any contact with them should demand building from below in working class communities and transparent democratic organisation; not waiting for orders from above. This is the only way to build left unity and incidentally the only way to stop the BNP.

"All the major parties believe everything should be run like a business - even being an MP is now a business. We have a political system that caters for the wealthy and those in political power expect their reward."

✉ From Northampton Save Our Services' election leaflets: two of them are posted in full with this article at our website www.thecommune.co.uk

london to glasgow: schools occupied against cuts

by Joe Thorne

Parents faced down four vans of riot cops in Lewisham on Wednesday 24th June, to retain occupation of the Lewisham Bridge Primary School roof. Two days later, parents re-occupied Wyndford Primary School in Glasgow; and the next day formed a picket line, refusing to allow council officials to move equipment from the school.

The direct action is a response to school closures which have placed children's education under threat, promising large class sizes, and longer journeys to school, as well as disruption in the short term. In the case of Lewisham Bridge, the council plans to transfer the pupils to a school under control of a private foundation, removing elected parent governors. A report from parents at Lewisham Bridge describes the morning on which bailiffs were scheduled to arrive:

"By 9.00 am there were about 20 of us in the occupation and about 20 in the park below us. We secured the gate and drew up the ladder much to the concern of the few journalists who were now stuck on the roof with us. The crowd below us was swelling with parents and other supporters, including mothers from the Charlotte Turner Parent's Forum who have been fighting the draconian decision by Greenwich Council to close their primary school in July.

"As the police formed their line around the school the bailiffs arrived. The journalists were finally let out by the security inside the school to the hysterical screams from Lewisham's press officer that they would all be arrested for trespass. "There then followed a 2-hour standoff. We kept up our chants and even sang songs courtesy of Goldsmiths students' musical accompaniment. Finally the cops realized that they couldn't physically remove us from the roof and they left, followed swiftly by the bailiffs."

In Glasgow, 22 schools are threatened with closure, as part of a council plan to plug a £6 million overspend. Parents previously occupied the school for a week in April, but have returned as part of the ongoing Save our Schools campaign. The day after the re-occupation, parents formed a picket line to trap vans which had arrived to take away materials. Occupiers refused to allow the vans to leave until all materials had been returned, and they were able to inspect each van. The council initially tried to intimidate picketers with a surveillance van, but eventually gave in, and returned the school materials.

School occupations have recently been effective in preventing closures in Edinburgh. While it looks ever more likely that similar cuts will intensify in the coming months and years, the occupations continue.

✉ The Wynford occupiers can be contacted via Nikki Rathmill on 07894 123721. Please send messages of solidarity, and look for updates on www.sosglasgow.wordpress.com. The Lewisham occupiers can be contacted on 07946 541331 and have a Facebook group, Hands off Lewisham Bridge Primary School.

call centre workers get organised

by Jack Staunton

Call centre workers in London held two meetings in June to discuss how we can best organise together. Although in the UK there are now some 750,000 people working in various types of call centre (such as sales, service calls and market research), very few are unionised. Employment is often very precarious, and the high turnover of staff in many workplaces means it can be difficult to organise, even though semi-casual work on low pay, along with management behaviour and petty rules, give plenty of reasons for us to do so.

The first meeting took place as an extension of the AGM of the Communication Workers' Union branch at the Pell and Bales charity call centre in Old Street. Workers from another Pell and Bales site, as well as CCA International (sales), IFF (market research) and Listen (charity fundraising) attended to share experiences of standing up to zealous managers and recruiting people to the union, as well as to plan ahead to co-ordinate our organising initiatives.

We went on to plan a charter of call centre workers' demands (across Britain and across industries and unions) and to organise the production of a call centre workers' bulletin: not a glossy union advert, but an organising tool produced by and for workers.

✉ For more info see www.callcentreworker.wordpress.com

labour party: no return to the living dead!

by Chris Kane

The much vaunted "green shoots of recovery" from the recession have been revealed to be no more than weeds in the New Labour cabinet. The only actual recovery we have seen has been the recovery of banks by the capitalist state. For the working class unemployment continues to grow: uncertainty about wages, job security and paying the rent or mortgage is on the mind of every working class person.

The main capitalist parties, Tories, New Labour and Liberals, are in disarray over the recession: they lack any clear understanding of its cause or a solution. But there is unanimity in maintaining the capitalist system and the idea that the working class should have to pay for the recession. Yet in this dire situation, where is the alternative? We have a deep structural crisis of capital which has been expressed first in the economy then the political system of parliamentary democracy, which has revealed to millions of people that there is something deeply rotten about the capitalist system.

However, the body that was founded to provide an alternative, the labour movement, is in crisis itself, with some sections in a state of virtual paralysis.

The trade unions have long fighting traditions which were built up over years by workers who joined together to promote their interests against the employers. Today the unions have become more of a prop for decadent capitalism than the fighting organisations we need. One of the main problems is the union bureaucracy, a broad stratum of officers, unaccountable leaders and unelected full-time officials. This layer stands over the rank and file members and its interests are distinct from the bulk of the membership. In some unions the whole organisation is run by 'men in suits' who spend their time lording it over the local members and their shop stewards, their main function being to keep a lid on things. In Unite and Unison, activism considered normal only a few years ago is viewed as 'ultra left' or even an 'attack on the union' these days.

The TUC and union hierarchy have been tied to the capitalist state and the logic of the system for years. Over 50% of TUC income now comes from the government. This situation has grown worse with their symbiotic relationship with New Labour, which unions have bankrolled no matter what it does! Having preached social partnership between labour and capital they are now stuck with the recession. Fearing the prospect of a Tory government, the official labour movement has come to terms with the recession, unwilling to rock



both of this pair have one foot in the grave

the boat and jeopardise the current government which is carrying out its own austerity policies.

The traditional left strategy on the industrial and political front is also in deep crisis. For years activists sought to push the union leaders to the left through broad lefts capturing positions. Leadership is important, but unless it is tied to a strategy to actually transform the labour movement it is the left which is transformed – sucked into the bureaucracy itself. In some unions, it has become indistinguishable from the very people they used to oppose. On the political front, for twelve years the traditional left, especially in England, has engaged in initiatives which have repeatedly failed to solve the crisis of working class representation. The last throw of the dice, No2EU, was like a swan song of a left bereft of ideas, which in a climate of chauvinist British nationalism emanating from all parties, took the pressure off our own ruling class and contributed to further retrogression in the working class.

After years of failure and lost opportunities under New Labour by the official labour movement and the traditional left, there is a turn away from even trying to solve the crisis of working class representation. The worst example is a return to the living dead – the Labour Party. The argument has re-emerged that New Labour should be supported because it is the lesser evil; some imagine that history will repeat itself with a left revival as with Bennism in the 1980s. There is no evidence that this will happen: in the 1970s the Labour Party structures had emptied out as badly as today – but there was a 15 million strong trade union movement and militant rank and file. That movement reacted to the Callaghan Labour Government, underpinning the new Labour

Left of Benn, Heffer etc. There is no comparison to our situation today. This revived Labourite perspective is a reflection of a left which has lost faith in itself and the capability of the working class to change society.

What should we do?

We should not give up on the working class: our efforts to resist the recession face difficulties and efforts to stifle initiative, but the victories at Lindsey show what is possible. On the political front we should not allow the abandonment of addressing the crisis of working class representation. The left wing RMT rail workers' union has a policy of democratic workers' representation committees. Activists should fight for this policy to be implemented. The question of representation needs to be tied to that of regaining control of our own organisations and using them to resist capital: we need to break the link from New Labour and from the stranglehold of the labour bureaucracy.

Communist recomposition

The failure of capitalism could not be more apparent, and the case for a new society – communism – could not be stronger. Communism is not a party, it is a new, free society fit for human beings. Nevertheless communists need to get organised. We do not have a genuine Communist Party today: the CPB is committed to its parliamentary *British Road to Socialism*, which means old style *state-socialism*. There is no genuine successor to the original CPGB which was revolutionary in the 1920s before its degeneration. There are many committed militants who do believe in a genuine communism, who are sick of the traditional left and sectarian socialism. We need to unite our forces.

The Commune is produced by a communist network, based on committees and individuals united around our platform. We advocate a plurality of ideas in the network, shedding the poisonous culture of the sects. We may be a minority for a long time, but an effective and organised minority of communists would be a step forward from our current fragmentation. We could start to make a difference in disputes and struggles of our class. Building a communist network would also be a step towards wider recomposition of the communist movement, both in terms of a vision of communism for the 21st century and developing concepts of how communist organise. A return to Labourism after the experience of the last decade is no way forward – let us throw off the dead weight of tradition and build for our own communist politics.

'no freedom of speech for the bnp'?

by Kofi Kyerewaa

Despite the repetitive Nazi name-calling, the British National Party achieved their hope of getting elected into the European Parliament, and the British hard left once again finds itself at the margins of electoral politics and unable to match the BNP in votes even across its fractured political front. The landscape has changed: the British National Party can command 900,000 votes, while a hotch-pot of Stalinist bureaucrats, Impossibleists (SPGB) and Scottish Socialists garnered less than half that at 350,000.

What is Socialist Workers Party leader Martin Smith's remedy to this tragic state of affairs? More of the same with added egg throwing, "no freedom of speech for fascists", "we should ban the BNP" and, bizarrely, on BBC's *Newsnight* Smith exclaimed to the polite but patronising Jeremy Paxman and Lib Dem MP Simon Hughes that the BNP had to be stopped because "they are counter-revolutionaries [to a Socialist Revolution?!]"

The question facing socialists is that as believers in democracy, do we respect the BNP's 'democratic right to express its views'? Or does the call for 'No freedom of speech for fascists' and therefore state censorship help in the battle to defeat the far right?

The principle of 'No platform for fascists' has been a stalwart of anti-fascist tactics since the days of accepting no platform in the National Union of Students in the early '90s. This argument has been outlined as follows:

- 1) When the BNP speak, attacks on migrants increase in the surrounding area - 6 million Jews didn't die because they failed to win the argument.
- 2) Rational debate with the BNP is impossible because they lie.
- 3) The BNP are fascists and seek to destroy working class power, they are not a "respectable" or "legitimate" party! They destroy our freedoms so we must destroy theirs!

Point 1: Without doubt the BNP are particularly good at attracting vicious and hateful racists. Where they organise it is

unsurprising that incitement to hatred results in attacks on immigrant communities. No platform in society means a state enforced media blackout, a laughable demand when you consider that *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* are the most popular papers in Britain and that the BNP has the most popular political party website.

To prevent the BNP from having the 'right to speak' does not just mean banning them as a political party but also means calling for more powers for the state to suppress wherever they seek to speak. 'No freedom of speech for fascists' is equal to McCarthyism for fascists which is as precarious as pissing in the wind. Yes, we must defend ethnic groups from racist attacks which happen by the state much more than BNP thugs our answers are at looking to working class self-defence against fascists and not by an extension of the surveillance state. And as it happens, it is we who must physically confront fascists in self-defence when they pose a threat: we cannot rely on any organ of the state to do that for us.

Point 2: Avoiding debate is a non-solution as rather than denying the BNP the oxygen of publicity or legitimacy, we find that their ideas are spread unchallenged politically. Socialists, rather than making the case politically about why we need to fight for the defence of all, are reduced to name calling and reporting on certain personalities (odious though they may be). Electoral victories for the BNP show that it isn't working. Such adherence to the principle of being willing to physically fight but not ideologically fight the BNP is absurd when they are close to controlling councils and have elected members of the European Parliament. The BNP are not going to be banned. Neither should we clamour for it: fascist ideas are not defeated by state diktat.

When socialists are campaigning on bread and butter issues like council housing or unemployment, working class people are dealt out rhetoric and propagandistic activity rather than mutual aid and support. The hard left's love-hate affair with the Labour Party has crippled it in acting independently on delivering social solutions. The BNP have been growing steadily in councillors, a prelude of bigger electoral gains,

because they canvass through door-knocking much more than the radical left. Electoral fronts are not enough: we need a political project that is long-term in thinking and is relentless in building a constituency in communities and not just in remote trade union bureaucrats' offices.

Point 3: As regards the 'Why the Nazis don't deserve democracy' argument, surely the state could replace 'Nazi' with 'Islamist', or 'revolutionary socialist'. We already can see the results of the rhetoric "they are not [legitimate] like us"; the reintroduction of detention without trial, extensive monitoring of all electronic communication and the promise of identity cards and a central database of all citizens.

As socialists we cannot trust the state to respect the historical values of bourgeois democracy or to decide which political parties are "legitimate" or not. Fascists can only be stopped by answering tough political questions through practical competence. Unlike liberals, we do not use the concept of freedom of speech to excuse ourselves from organising on the streets but rather the opposite. We know that where the BNP seeks to spread its agenda we must be on the same streets bringing people together in a left-wing coalition for a better alternative.

If we believe the BNP must be fought physically then we must also do this intellectually too: walking off from public debates can't be done in London's City Hall any more than it can be done the European Parliament. Pretending that no-one will take them seriously if only we shout "Nazi scum" loud enough must end. The political process has legitimised the BNP whether we like or not: ignoring the BNP is no longer an option, and since they are an increasingly powerful political force we must treat them as such. UKIP raided £2 million in expenses from the EU, and we can only assume that the BNP will do the same.

Working people will only trust a political party that not only offers real change to the status quo, but appears to know how to do it. This is why community organising is so important: this is why Scottish Socialists despite the splits are doing better than their English and Welsh counterparts.

mixed results to soas occupation against immigration raid

An article by activists involved in the recent SOAS occupation covering the story of the dispute and the lessons learnt from its outcome

Even for those well used to the low standards and dirty tricks of private contractor ISS and the UK Border Agency (UKBA), the brutal immigration raid on cleaners at the School for Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London last month came as a shock. It sparked a protest movement and occupation which – for 48 hours at least – constituted a significant show of strength against the university management and promised to win real concessions from those directly involved in the shameful intimidation of workers who – the timing was not coincidental – had only recently won union recognition and the London living wage.

That SOAS Director Paul Webley eventually managed to get his office, the Directorate and two conference rooms back without having made any real concessions proved a disappointment for many involved in the action. As activists continue to assess 'what went wrong', and rue an opportunity missed, it remains to be seen whether future gains made by the ongoing campaign will vindicate the strategy of those who wanted to end the occupation early.

Immigration attack

Workers had been instructed to attend an "emergency staff meeting" at 6.30am on Friday June 12th. Forty Border police, kitted out in full riot gear, were hidden behind a stage in meeting room G2. As managers barred the exit during the first part of the meeting, an ISS manager used a code word as a cue for the immigration officers to emerge and begin making arrests. The SOAS campus was sealed off while the cleaners were locked in a room, and interrogated one by one, without legal representation or translation.

Of the nine detained, six were deported within 48 hours and three placed in detention. Luzia, six-months pregnant, was one of those on a flight to Colombia that weekend. Two cleaners, Marina Silva, a 63-year-old who had applied for asylum after the murder of her husband in Bolivia, and Rosa de Perez, a Nicaraguan supporting four children, remain in detention at Yarl's Wood as *The Commune* went to press.

The focus for anger and resistance against the raid quickly became the role SOAS had played in facilitating it. By the morning of Monday June 15th, a broad coalition (from student union activists to anti-deportation campaigners, the Campaign Against Immigration Controls (CAIC), University and College Union (UCU), Unison, the SWP, Alliance for Workers' Liberty, Latin American workers' organisations and several members of The Commune) had been mobilised to, amongst other demands, work to halt the deportations and ensure SOAS did all it could to secure the release of the cleaners in detention.

As SOAS Director, Paul Webley, conducted a Monday-morning conference in the main campus building at Russell Square, dozens of protesters entered his office to call on him to make immediate representations to the Home Office on the cleaners' behalf. The 20-minute 'dialogue' that followed – all posted to youtube shortly afterwards – show Webley feebly claiming that SOAS had had nothing to do with the raid and refusing to lift a finger in support of his own staff. It would lead to 'chaos', he said, if he was expected to frustrate the objectives of the UK Border Police. 'Friday's visit was not arranged or influenced by any member of staff at Soas,' he continued to claim, setting the tone for 48 hours of lies and evasions from university management who still deny they were complicit in the attack.

Occupation

After Webley had been turfed out of his palatial offices – the academic and administrator earns £193,000 a year – activists moved to occupy the space and begin the work of building a movement capable of sustaining itself for the long haul and winning immediate and urgently needed gains for the workers fighting deportation and detention. Numbers were regularly bolstered by rallies in the square which the first-floor offices overlooked (and it was to those gatherings that other cleaners were able to come – though this remained a

limited line of communication, something that was to prove important later on) and on Monday evening over 50 people were crammed into one of the Directorate's conference rooms to decide on the direction and tactics of the occupation. Two dozen protesters stayed the night – a successful, radical and long-lasting action seemed possible.

But that evening turned out to be the height of the protest's strength and coherence, as debates and divisions over negotiations throughout Tuesday gradually allowed the SOAS management to wriggle out of making significant concessions. The occupation ended by Wednesday June 17th with a victory rally but few real gains. A statement released in the afternoon by some occupiers admitted that the 'concessions' made by Webley in a signed letter, were ultimately more 'symbolic' than real.

Those concessions included Webley writing to the Home Office and a commitment by him to arrange a Governor's meeting to discuss the issue of ending the contract with ISS and bringing the cleaners in house.

Crucially, there was no commitment by SOAS not to facilitate further raids nor a more limited agreement to notify the union, on health and safety grounds, before future 'visits' by the Border police. There was certainly no apology. The 11 original demands made by the occupiers, including the reinstatement of Jose Bermudez Stalin, who had done so much to organise his fellow workers at SOAS, had been swept aside or qualified into non-existence. For many of those involved throughout what was often an inspiring protest, the question remains: Why did the occupiers walk out when still in a position of strength and with so little gained?

'Victory' claimed

Some members of the occupation were shocked to read the 'victory post' that went up on the FreeSOAScleaners blog on the Wednesday afternoon, and have since collectively released a counter-statement to temper the triumphalism. It called not only for the continuation and renewal of the campaign against ISS, union-busting and collaboration with the Border police, but stressed that lessons must be learned from the occupation after so much promise and negotiating strength on Monday evening was allowed to dissipate in the rush for a deal.

It identified a failure of participatory processes and a lack of consultation with cleaners as key determinants of the occupation's rush to a deal. 'There was never a decision made at the occupation about who would negotiate on its behalf,' the statement read. 'This role was taken by the Student Union representatives, in particular the outgoing Student Union president. At the first meeting with the directorate the occupation's demands were not even presented. Following this, occupation participants who were also elected to the Student Union were present at the negotiations, but still control was not held by the occupation over the negotiations and, as they continued, the demands – which were collectively agreed and changed in a series of meetings – were progressively watered down.'

'Crucially the cleaners themselves were not involved in the decision making process of the occupation. While it may have been difficult to make the occupation a 'safe' place for the remaining workers to visit, the occupiers could and should have made a more concerted effort to inform, talk to and take direction from the workers directly affected by the raid. This could have helped to increase the occupations militancy and keep it focused on demanding tangible concessions from management.'

'We should be clear that whatever gains were made during the occupation were made by taking direct action against the SOAS management and that many demands – including bringing all contract staff in house, keeping immigration officers from entering campus under any circumstances, the reinstatement of Jose Stalin Bermudez and even an apology for their role in the raids – were not met because of the continued intransigence of that same management.'

Why did it end?

The drift towards agreeing to Webley's offer – one that was not voted on at any stage, even on Wednesday morning – was ultimately determined by the priorities and perspective



director paul webley's squirming under questioning was caught on film and posted on youtube

of the SWP and the leading SOAS students involved in the occupation. Collectively they had, of course, been the most prominent figures throughout and had assumed responsibility for conducting negotiations through the elected student union (at least one of whom, Nizzam Uddin, was clearly opposed to the action and had a vested interest in cautious compromise), using a line of communication which Webley had stipulated on Monday afternoon for reasons of delegitimising the broader membership of the occupation, on the (as it turned out, correct) assumption that indirect, fragmented dialogue would work to his advantage.

This is not necessarily to criticise the role played by those negotiators: the SOAS student and SWP position within the protest was privileged by what they had contributed to it, and by their greater knowledge of, and access to, the university management. Whatever the reason, personal or structural, a 'natural' hierarchy emerged which, combined with the SWP's eagerness to claim a victory, and the general sense among a majority of occupiers that things were getting "riskier", contributed to the willingness to accept Webley's limited offers.

There was, without doubt, a gap opening up between some more concerned about the "threat" of eviction than others, and the panic decision-making that the mass meetings degenerated into was seemingly born out of that. However frustrating this may have proved for those advocating a more militant stance, it remains true that many activists who wanted a different, more uncompromising negotiating strategy were unable to persuade the majority because they hadn't put bodies on the ground when it most mattered: over both evenings and the Wednesday morning. At least a dozen activists had the potential to shift the direction of the occupation but relationships of trust hadn't been built in time to enable that to happen. The 'privileged position' of the SOAS students and the SWP was, in a sense, 'earned', and the analysis that the SWP brought – and what they considered a 'good outcome' – could only be challenged (amicably and productively) by investing as much time and energy into the protest as they had done.

The problem of the negotiators pushing for a deal, and the imbalance of information and power that entrenched, became seemingly unstoppable by Tuesday night. While it reflected the divisions between the occupiers – in politics, outlook and organising principles – that began to emerge once the management started making offers, however derisory, it might have been more effectively countered by focusing more clearly on the cleaners' key demands – namely, the guarantee that SOAS would not facilitate any future raids – and by reassuring the majority that the threat of eviction was not as high as some were claiming.

Indeed, it was known by Tuesday that the injunction that had been served that morning was of dubious legal value. With Webley regularly threatening to evict throughout the day, only to then 'give more time for negotiations', it was clear he was trying to avoid having to use force. It was equally clear that he was desperate to get his offices back. The strength still lay with the occupation on Wednesday morning.

The 'decision' to leave has wasted the chance to win gains for the SOAS cleaners in detention and for those that remain to work in an institution that has proved itself complicit in union-busting and racist immigration controls. The campaign, of course, continues; and the SWP and others hope that a decision of the Governors in November ending the contract with ISS can't be discounted. It was also their view that 'forcing' Webley to make representations to the Home Office was a significant concession which would have been put at risk if the occupiers' had been expelled from the building by police. This is arguable: but anti-deportation experts were wary of giving too much weight to any letter sent by SOAS and were far from confident that a late call from Webley would have much practical effect.

The SWP position also maintained that the power was with the 'students' and the faculty's sympathy with the occupation in general, and the students in particular, and with the end of term coming that week, the presence of both those groups was going to diminish sharply, and with it the strength of the

movement. There was moreover a view among students that it was they who were going to have to take the brunt of any repressive measures following a forced eviction. They also argued that the chances of SOAS authorising another immigration raid are now minimal, irrespective of any formal written agreement to this effect.

These are legitimate differences, argued in good faith; but the undemocratic way the occupation ended remains a cause for concern. As an activist who stayed on Tuesday night said: 'People were already tidying up when I got up [on Wednesday morning]. It seemed like people had decided from the start that it was going to end on Wednesday, no matter what. There certainly weren't any conversations that I was involved in that talked seriously about maintaining the occupation if the managers came back with less than the agreed minimums.'

'It all started to get a bit worrying when people in the room started requesting that the management write up its own wording of what they thought the occupation was trying to get out of them. This left us with two documents – one that the occupying group had been working on collectively for days with agreed minimums, and one that the management had drawn up that gave very little – and certainly didn't meet many of the agreed minimums.

'The group was discussing how to marry the two together (i.e. make even more concessions) when Nizzam [the outgoing Student Union president] got frustrated by how long discussion was taking. At one point he highlighted that the statement was between management and the SU which meant he could go and get it signed without the support of the group!

'Everyone panicked and that only strengthened the perceived need to basically pass the management back the document they had typed up to sign. Any act of signing was seen as a victory.'

Another commented: 'There was a frustrating level of deference to management: Nizam gets a phone call to say [a deal] must be signed by 11am and everyone panics – we say, 'Hold on a minute. Since when do we defer to their deadlines and their requirements for negotiation – we've occupied his bloody office!'



hundreds rallied outside the occupation, yet some argued that it was in danger of losing support

Moreover, Webley's rhetoric since the end of the occupation doesn't provide much hope that SOAS will begin to respond to the demands made. In a letter sent to SOAS staff on June 22th, he wrote: 'Thankfully many colleagues are aware that the allegations being made against SOAS are untrue, most notably that we had invited immigration officials on to our campus. This is something that has caused a great deal of concern and anxiety to our staff, students, stakeholders and peers.

'Throughout this entire process SOAS has acted in good faith and in accordance with the law. SOAS is obliged to cooperate with the authorities and not breach any law that could lead to prosecution.'

The campaign continues

While an open and self-critical debate is needed to ensure that future occupations realise their potential, many aspects of the SOAS protest nevertheless offer hope for the future: the breadth of the coalition assembled, the willingness to adopt militant action, the barriers (at least initially) that were broken down between workers and students, and the growing awareness of the connections between immigration policy and exploitation in the workplace.

As the counter-statement by the 'dissenting' occupiers put it: 'We hope the campaign will become bigger and stronger after this occupation. Cleaners are still facing deportation, while union busting tactics and the frequency of raids against migrant workers are increasing. Practical victories are urgently needed and these will only be achieved through a realistic understanding that management, the police and the government are not on our side. It of course takes longer than two and a half days, but the occupation was a significant show of power. In future we should be more confident about what can be achieved when we stand together.'

Yarl's Wood detention centre: a voice from the inside

€Late June saw hunger strikes at Yarl's Wood detention centre in Bedfordshire in protest at inadequate medical care: after all, this 'detention centre', run by private contractor Serco, is in all but name a prison. In this piece, a Chilean woman detained in Yarl's Wood speaks of how her employer had her sent there after she protested about unpaid wages.

I've lived in London for two years, working as a cleaner and factory worker – usually several shifts a day. At first when I was working at Fitness First there was no problem and I got all my wages, but then they changed their cleaning contractor. The new bosses deliberately took on staff without papers. I was told to keep working for three months without pay, and then I was sacked. They threatened to take my case to the Home Office because I had no right to be here. But I said to them that I wasn't going to walk away and would get my money back. They were surprised because they thought they were big and they thought I was nothing.

Then began the story of working with the union, the Latin American Workers Association and London Coalition Against Poverty. So thanks to my friends and the union, we won this fight and I was paid over £1000 that I was owed. Then I found out that hundreds of people were experiencing exactly the same problem as me.

But those who I spoke to were afraid to speak out and told me they'd rather keep quiet. This exploitation is based on the fact that people will keep quiet. But despite my employers' threats of calling the police etc it was important not to be afraid. I said to these people it is necessary to protest and not to be afraid. It is possible to stand up to them and it is possible to fight them.

I decided to get involved in helping people who had the same problem as me. I told them the same had happened to me and nothing bad had happened.



Yarl's Wood is a prison for immigrants

When a company is exploiting people like that because they are the weakest we shouldn't keep quiet, we should shout it loud so that people open their eyes and realise what is happening.

When I get out of here, by which I mean going back to London not Chile, (though I guess I'll get out either way), I'll go and continue talking to people about it just as I did before I was arrested by the police.

I'll tell people my story and what's happened to me because it was the management of this company who told the police my address. I am writing my story now to share it even from the detention centre. I have been interviewed by the radio, national newspapers and a Latin American paper – they all said I was brave. Many people are phoning because they know I'm willing to talk and will speak out.

If the same thing happens to you as it did to me, you should confront these people and if you need support, you should go out and get it. There are organisations that can represent, like in my case, and unions. Don't take threats and don't be afraid of threats that companies like this make when they are not paying people properly. Good luck and I hope you don't get caught by the immigration police like I was.

campaign against tower hamlets esol cuts

by Alice Robson

Friday June 12th saw hundreds of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students, staff and supporters march in East London in protest at major cuts to ESOL announced at Tower Hamlets College.

The march followed a week of action since the cuts were announced on June 5th, including an unofficial walkout on the 8th, a lobby of the principal on the 9th (with staff joined by 50 students who pushed past security after being denied entry for having the wrong pass), protests at the college's awards ceremony and joint UCU and Unison meetings on June 12th proposing a vote of no confidence in newly-appointed Principal Michael Farley. After the meetings, ESOL learners marched with their teachers, other college staff and supporters from the college's adult education site at Arbour Square to a rally outside the 14-19 site at Poplar. Students and staff are angry and worried about the future, but there was a sense of hope as this anger was channelled into action to protect jobs and courses, and a real feeling of solidarity as students, staff and representatives of other unions addressed those assembled at Poplar.

The document Michael Farley circulated to college staff on Friday June 5th laid out proposed cuts of £2 million, which will see 50% of all ESOL courses offered by Tower Hamlets College cut from September. The document, ironically titled 'Securing the Future' detailed the loss of over 1,500 ESOL places alongside 60 job losses. There is now a one month 'consultation period' on the document, with staff being told on July 6th if they are at risk of 'dismissal' (the language used in the document). Those who are going to be dismissed will be told on July 10th, just before the end of the college term. Teaching staff, support staff and learning centre staff will all be affected. Staff have been consoled with the fact that new posts are being created, but unsurprisingly these are not teaching posts and the majority are business positions.

The ESOL classes most affected by the cuts will be at entry levels, those in the college's community outreach centres, those not expressly for work. They therefore affect the most vulnerable and historically excluded students, and will affect the wider community as well as current and potential learners. The attack is gendered as well as racist – the vast majority of those attending courses are women. Some are recently arrived in the country, others have been here for



hundreds marched against esol cuts on June 12th

many years but never had the opportunity to attend a course before. Reasons for this include the incredible lack of ESOL provision in the decades prior to this one, time constraints because of their long hours of labour (particularly unpaid labour in the home), needing to travel outside their local area, and the fear of entering a classroom after negative experience or no prior experience of formal learning. Community-based provision is essential in helping to break down some of these barriers.

The June 12th demonstration itself was a testament to the role that ESOL has played in the lives of the (overwhelmingly female) student protesters. There were women leading chants on megaphones, women carrying placards with their own powerful slogans, and women speaking eloquently and emphatically to the national press about what ESOL means to them. Key messages were the need for English to allow them to support their children's learning, so they can be a part of their communities and (contrary to the views many hold of these learners) so they can work.

These women have developed not only language skills, but increased confidence, self-esteem and above all a critical engagement with the world around them. And it is this which underlies this fight. The fight is for jobs, for student places, but also for the principle of education itself.

€For more information on the struggle, you can visit either <http://defendjobsandeducation.posterous.com> with loads of great photos and videos, or www.uculeft.devisland.net

tube strikers attacked for daring to defy recession

by Kieran Hunter

'England fans hit strikers for six' declared a headline in *The Sun* referring to the fact the inconvenience attendees suffered getting to Wembley due to the tube strike did little to impact upon attendance, or dampen enthusiasm about, England's 6-0 victory over Andorra. Revelling in this, on 11th June *The Sun* published pictures of England fans holding up signs declaring that Bob Crow, RMT general secretary and organiser of the tube strikes, "is a *****".

The public response to the two-day strike across London's tube network in mid-June has largely been a reaction to their immediate experiences, rather than one of solidarity with the striking workers. In many ways, as Tim Black observed on *Spiked*, the reaction was not particularly different to the reaction to the heavy snow that brought the London transport network to a halt earlier in the year.

"But what did you think I'd say?" said Mark - a twenty-something from Walthamstow who works in advertising sales - justifying his frustration with the strike. "The [free evening] papers are obviously against the strikers, but I know there's obviously another side to the story. But I just want to get home, it's been a long day and this strike is going to waste about three hours of my life on buses because the Victoria line's down."

However this immediate reaction gave way to a more considered response: 'I've been told I'm not getting a pay increase this year and my targets are impossible. It's a bit hard to sympathise with them when we're all going through this and they're just making things worse for us.'

Mark's view was shared by many commuters striding down the steps to the entrance of Liverpool Street tube station and being greeted by a jobsworth manager, two policemen and a sign outlining the major delays and cancellations of the tube network. This was compounded by the fact that the demands of the RMT union were far from clearly understood. Whilst fundamentally about trying to safeguard what the RMT estimates to be as many as 4,000 jobs, demands also included the restatement of two Victoria line workers and a 5% pay increase. As Glenroy Watson, RMT branch chair, told the 14th June *Right to Work* conference, "Remember it is not about a single issue, it's about multiple issues here... please don't listen to right-wing rags like the [*Evening Standard*] or... certain unions."

Whilst it's right that PR spin shouldn't have been the key concern of Crow and the RMT, this lack of clarity about what the strikes were about did little to earn the sympathies of commuters. One reduced it to a "personality clash between Boris and Bob, where we're the ones who suffer". And, certainly, when given the opportunity to discuss the strikes in the media, Crow would more often than not use it to demand a meeting with London Mayor Boris Johnson, rather than try to gain public understanding.



the media trumpeted these england fans' 'courage'

At the RMT demonstration outside the Liverpool Street, the lack of public support was often blamed upon the media's biased reporting of events. The striking tube workers were extremely apologetic that such action was necessary and went into great detail justifying it. As one woman, who had been an RMT member for several decades, said: "I know the inconvenience this causes. One of the reasons I take such pride in my job is that I know we provide an important service to Londoners. But the union has decided strike action is necessary and so strike action is taken."

But, given the recent successes at Visteon, Lindsey and Waterford, why don't more people draw inspiration from the militancy of the RMT and go on strike too? "They should. Hopefully this might, in a small way, encourage others to follow."

"We're not all lucky enough to be RMT members", explained Charlotte - a 29-year old research analyst - semi-sarcastically as she tried to plan an alternative route to meet her friends: "My boss told me that this year the pay rise I was promised 6 months into my job was no longer going to happen. He even consoled me by saying that deflation might mean my existing salary would go further! And what can I do? Not a good time to tell him to F- off, you know?"

This, however, is precisely what Bob Crow, general secretary of the RMT, says he would do on behalf of his members if anyone asked them to work for free, referring to the recent proposals made to staff by BA CEO Willie Walsh, since taken up by 7,000 employees. Crow's militancy and uncompromising approach to getting the best deal for his members is widely seen to explain why the RMT is bucking the long-term decline in union membership: RMT membership has risen from 50,000 to over 80,000 in the seven years since Crow has been general secretary.

Crow, however, is often described as a 'prehistoric relic' still clinging to an era of class struggles, where Communism could still be seen as a viable alternative. He is not ashamed to call himself a Communist, claiming in a recent *Guardian*

interview, "If I were a worker and my trade union leader was a communist and he was getting me good pay rises, [I'd say] bring on more communists."

"It's all well and good for them," says Robert, a 23-year old project manager at a B2B publication, "but they've got to get real. The bankers have squandered all the money and the government's continually fucking up the economy. There's just no money out there." Attempting to reclaim the moral high-ground from the arguments used by the strikers, Robert's arguments are dressed in altruistic language: "If they get pay-rises, someone else is going to suffer. Less welfare or something. It's just greedy really, I mean they're hardly going to starve if they don't get this [5% pay rise] are they?"

This commonplace attack of Bob Crow's demands is epitomised by Stephen Pollard in *The Times*: "He [Crow] lives in a different world, one where employers sit on piles of cash, keeping it from workers through sheer bloody mindedness."

The extent to which this attitude is shared by the public is striking. In a recent poll two-thirds of Britain's workers claimed they would accept a pay cut in order to keep working during the recession. Those demanding more for themselves and their families are as often characterised as 'greedy fat bastards' - akin to the bankers who are often blamed for the recession in the first place - as they are heroic workers struggling for a better life. This, worryingly, means proposals such as the ability to sue trade unions for the damage they cause during a strike, or further restricting unions' ability to strike are being given a serious hearing.

The broadly negative, or at best apathetic, public reaction to the RMT tube strikes - and more broadly to other recent workplace struggles in the UK - is of course hugely frustrating to those of us who refuse to accept the 'reality' that no alternative to capitalism is possible. But this is the situation we face.

Whilst modest in terms of our ambitions, we must understand and tackle this situation on its own terms: Challenging the culture of austerity where people are prepared to make do with less and those demanding more are seen as pathologically greedy. Inspiring people with stories of movements, such as those at Visteon and Waterford, where workers overcame their sense of fatalism, and fear of the consequences, to work together and take matters into their own hands. And refusing to buy into the rhetoric from corporate executives and the state that there is a 'limited pot of money', therefore collaborating in managerial discussions about how best to make cuts and 'share the pain'.

Taking a lead from Bob Crow and meeting such management requests to blur their responsibilities with those of their employees with a healthy 'Fuck off' is a good place to start.

iranian struggle goes beyond mousavi

by David Broder

The explosion of popular defiance following the seemingly fraudulent re-election of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad marks a turning point in the evolution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

While in the last two years there were strikes on the Tehran bus network and in isolated factories, as well as illegal student protests thousands strong, the post-election demonstrations were by far the greatest challenge to the authority of the Ayatollahs' regime since it was established in 1979.

Whether or not it was the intention of defeated reformist presidential candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the only "outs" for the regime's hierarchy when he continued to encourage protests were either total capitulation or to crack down hard in order to defend the very survival of the institutions of the Islamic Republic. Even though Mousavi is himself no radical, the very fact that he maintained his dissent after the Supreme Leader had approved the election of Ahmedinejad necessarily meant the assertion of some elementary democratic principles as against the values of the current regime.

This despite the fact that, as Ayatollah Khamenei remarked in a speech demanding an end to protests, everyone who voted had in fact voted for a variant of theocracy: since the candidates were vetted by the religious leadership and so it was impossible to vote against the regime as such.

Indeed, Mousavi was himself the Prime Minister of Iran from 1981 to 1989, presiding over the Iran-Iraq war as well as the butchering of many thousands of leftists as the Islamists cracked down on the workers' movement which had played a central role in the overthrow of the Shah and so posed an unwelcome threat to the Ayatollahs' monopoly of power. No democrat, Mousavi has been idolised in mainstream West-

ern media as a liberal challenger to the existing order: but the real challenge emerges not from this particular individual, who many who usually boycott polls turned out for and who has a rather 'light' personal control over his supporters, but from the resistance of the masses themselves.

Of course, we have to be realistic in our assessment of this movement's real potential, and it is easy to be carried away by Western media exaggerating the support for pro-Western liberals as well as our own understandable enthusiasm for the mass movement. In fact it is politically very diverse (and with diffuse goals) and not particularly proletarian in make-up, which threatens both its chances of succeeding and the hope that it might do something rather more worthwhile than change the suit in charge of the slaughterhouse.

These questions are important for the anti-war movement, and although Stalinist groups backed Ahmedinejad, some leftists' attitudes have been shaken up by the need to say something positive about a movement which most people in Britain would sympathise with. Although Hugo Chávez had congratulated Ahmedinejad on his 'victory', his British supporters *Socialist Appeal* saw mirages of working-class revolution on the streets of Tehran.

The SWP were also in a pickle. For twenty years they have supported the "anti-imperialism" of the regime, saying it was not appropriate for the Stop the War Coalition to support movements inside Iran, and tried to silence the anti-war, anti-regime Hands Off the People of Iran campaign. This time round *Socialist Worker* celebrated "people power" in a remarkable change of tack. (They have performed a similar 180-degree turn over the Lindsey workers, many of whom in fact have the same politics and slogans as in their January strikes when the SWP condemned them).

The degree to which the British anti-war movement continue to ignore oppositionists in Iran still hangs in the balance, however. It was always, of course, right to resolutely oppose Western intervention (any war or 'surgical strike' would have made the current movement unthinkable), but real solidarity with the Iranians themselves always has to include supporting struggles within that country against the regime too.

As it is, the people demonstrating in recent weeks appear to have been beaten down by the state machine including its Basiji (religious militia). Nevertheless, the movement may resurface or express itself in different ways as it looks increasingly unlikely that Mousavi will come to power.

Indeed, whilst many observers have compared the Iranian regime's crackdown to Tiananmen Square-style methods of breaking opposition, few make the point that the Iranian regime seems much less able than China in 1989 to work its way towards a liveable economic position. This presents dangers for the regime both from technocrats and army men who think it is incompetent, and from the people on the receiving end of the economic disaster.

The underlying social crisis in Iran will continue even if the religious hierarchy is able to put a lid on the current wave of resistance. New battles over unpaid wages and rampant inflation, as well as the terrible lack of personal and democratic freedoms (particularly for women and LGBT people), will go on. As such our solidarity with the Iranian working class and its struggles must continue even once Mousavi's fans at BBC and CNN have turned their attention elsewhere.

Hands Off the People of Iran has launched an activist blog with news from Iranian comrades about the ongoing struggles as well as useful analysis of the divisions in the ruling class. See www.hopinewsfromiran.wordpress.com

alberto durango: 'i am for justice and the truth'

Alberto Durango is a cleaner activist who has repeatedly been victimised for his prominent role in union organising. In this piece he charts workers' attempts to get a better deal and Unite's abandonment of their struggle.

I came to London in 1995 running away from persecution by paramilitary groups because of my union activities with the banana workers in Uraba (Colombia). When I was new in London, despite my sense of justice, on several occasions I had to put my head down and let bosses commit abuses and steal my salary just because of my immigration status.

In 2002 when I was working all night with another 22 full time workers for Lancaster Office Cleaning Company at its Enron contract, the manager invited us to a meeting and told us that because of Enron's bankruptcy all of us had lost our jobs. Then he said what good workers we were, expressed his apologies and invited us to leave the building. We were in shock but immediately replied that we would stay until the company guaranteed our jobs. After an exchange of allegations he told us that he was going to call the Police. We insisted on staying but after half an hour we decided to leave the building because of the immigration status of some of the workers, including my own.

Then we decided to go to Lancaster's headquarters in Keston, Kent. When we arrived the top bosses were shocked but we were treated very well, with food and even money for minicabs, but again they tried to convince us that Lancaster had nothing to do with what happened and inviting us to go home and wait until the company found new jobs for us. We asked how long we should wait and if the company was going to keep paying our salaries. They replied that the company was not going to pay our salaries because it was Enron's fault, not Lancaster's, and we should be pleased that the company was going to try to find jobs for us. So we decided to fight using the legal system and start going to the Citizens' Advice Bureau; I remember we went along to the CAB with 22 workers, and the people inside used to tell us to come only one or two at a time, but we always went together. After an exchange of letters with the company the company owner attended a meeting with us and in the end we won redundancy money and reinstatement.

After that I got involved in different struggles, including one with McLaren cleaning company's Grant Thornton contract, where I was working on a part time basis, and where the manager was very abusive towards the cleaners, stopping money from the salaries. Because we complained I got dismissed, and that is how I met the Latin American Workers' Association. I received all the necessary support and won my case in the employment tribunal, forcing the company to offer my job back, give me references and pay compensation. Because of this I became a voluntary member of the Association, helping people with individual employment cases and recruiting them to the union.

Then I got involved in the Justice for Cleaners campaign: a campaign that gave a lot of hope for cleaners in London. I helped to recruit many people during the campaign, using such examples of victories as in the Canary Wharf area at Goldman Sachs, Barclays etc; at that time I was working in the City area in a contract at Schroders investment. Guillermo Sanchez and I unionised the whole contract, 42 workers in total, and were expecting the union to do the campaign, but the leaders used to respond with promises that never they never then fulfilled. At the same time I started receiving complaints from some workers from other buildings that I had recruited to the union, telling me that the union had let them down, including workers at Lloyds TSB (the building next to Schroders), ING bank and some others with individual cases.

I decided to meet them to see what the situation was and find out about situations similar to what had happened at Schroders. With this information, after a democratic meeting we decided to start writing to the union, with all the workers' signatures, trying to call the union official's attention to support an action so we could get the living wage. After the letter to the union we mobilised all the workers to Transport House (Unite's headquarters) for a event with cleaners from other sites. When the union official started calling the people by site name, he realised that the Schroders cleaners were all there so he told us to go to a meeting room because Schroders was a special case; we did so, somewhat happy thinking that finally we were going to get the union's support, but instead the union official told us that if we wanted to demonstrate we should wear masks so the company would not take action against us. The people were stunned, listening to him talking to us like fools: this guy was the symbol of the fights in other sites around the City and Docklands.

But we decided to keep fighting, with or without the Union officials. So we started writing our petitions on three fronts: one letter to Schroders, one to Lancaster and another one to the union; surprisingly the responses from Lancaster were nearly the same as the union's. Schroders, in reply, tried to



unite/t&g's justice for cleaners campaign has been put on ice, leaving the workers to fend for themselves



change the hours of work and reduce the number of part time workers from 32 to 9, so we responded with the threat of demonstrations.

The union officials contacted us and invited the workers to talk to them outside the building and again tried to persuade us to accept the company's proposals; we were very united and knew of the fairness of our petitions. Unfortunately the union officials looked like they were working for the HR department of the company because they were using the company's language. The unions managed to stop us demonstrating on three occasions: every time, before the demonstration the official would call us and tell that the company had called for negotiations, but this never produced any result. The last time was when we confronted him and demanded that he tell us what the result of the negotiations were. He answered that we were going to have the right to have a consultation meeting: again he was treating us like fools. That is when we decided to put a date for the demonstration. When we informed the union official he went again to the Schroders building and proposed changing the date because the union had a better, long plan to do daily demonstrations and so win; the workers did not believe him but decided to play his game. He told us the organisers could do October 15th 2008, and all the workers said, OK, we will wait for you that date (we knew that was not going to happen). We had already decided a date (October 17th). We waited for them on the 15th but as predicted they never arrived.

On the 17th we did the demonstration with the solidarity of other cleaners and groups, after intimidation and threats from the company we negotiated with them and as a result of our resistance we won.

As normal the bosses always hit back and started a process of constructive dismissal against me but I defended myself using the employment laws. During this time I met Edwin Pazmino, a Unite shop steward working at Willis insurance company for MITIE cleaning services. He told me the history where the workers got dismissed at Willis, including him. In his history we found coincidences with the Schroders workers: he recruited all the workers to Unite, and after they won the living wage, the company responded by changing the hours of work (from 7-11 to all night) and reducing the number of workers. They had the same official as us and the workers did not trust him. He and three women workers wanted to fight back and asked me for solidarity, so we started creating a network of solidarity to fight back and start a series of demonstrations in front of Willis from the beginning of February 2009 trying get the reinstatement of these workers and at the same time trying to get the union to support the workers. The workers wrote a letter to the Unite deputy general secretary Jack Dromey asking him to support the union members, and he responded with the same story as the company, a situation that did not surprise me because in Schroders we got used to this.

We managed to get support from some of the union's branches, workers and important personalities around London including the Unite Visteon workers, Unite construction workers branch, RMT Finsbury Park branch, John McDonnell, Jeremy Corbyn, and sent a letter to Jack Dromey asking him to listen to the workers and support them.

In March Schroders used the third party pressure law and asked Lancaster to put me out of the building. Lancaster put me in different contracts around the City area but never told me what my job was, introduced me to anyone or showed me any place to sit down (like a prison) and on many occasions the managers verbally abused me.

When I was on the May Day demonstration I received a call from one of Lancaster's managers inviting me for a meeting to offer a alternative job at 9:30am on the 6th. I went early that morning to the construction workers' demonstration in the Olympic stadium where the organisers were going to use our megaphone (we got it in solidarity from one of the Unite branches). At 8:45 I went to Lancaster's headquarters and arrived at 9:15; one of the HR managers (the one attacking me all the time after the Schroders victory) told that he was calling me to make sure I wasn't late then asked me to sit down in a meeting room and wait for him. Then he come back with the Police and immigration. They immediately started asking questions and then searched me. They found on me lots of socialist propaganda and asked me if I am a socialist, then they hand cuffed me and took me to my home in a private car. They searched the whole house and kept asking me what is my name with MITIE (which proves my solidarity with the MITIE workers is related with my arrest). They also found a DVD from the Tamil community which I collected at a forum on May 4th; one of the Police said that the Tamils are a terrorist organization so I could get arrested on the basis of terrorism laws. They confiscated my partner's and daughter's passports saying that the passports were false. They took me to a Peckham police station and I left at 8pm with a caution.

The company dismissed me so I called the union to get represented and I got the same official that let the Schroders and Willis workers down. During the process I found many irregularities where instead of helping me he was doing the opposite. When I got the evidence I wrote to the regional secretary asking him to investigate this union official but I never got a response.

After this I was invited to Unite's United Left meeting, a situation that give me lot of hope because I was expecting the progressive part of the union. But the same official that let the Schroders and MITIE workers down and tried to help the company to dismiss me was there. In some ways I was happy because I was going to have the chance to say the truth in front of the people and open their eyes, and also I was ready for the people to listen to a debate. But the chair did not let me talk, with various excuses. The first was that we did not inform the organisers on time, but the people who invited me proved that they wrote e-mails in advance. Then he said that the same union officials had issues with us (the Willis campaign and me) so I was not allowed to talk. The most progressive people there managed to get a vote of the whole meeting: the result was 39 against me talking and 29 in favour.

I think the difference in the votes was about the friends of the union officials. For me it is shameful for people that call themselves 'left' to vote not to listen to a victimised worker supporting an unofficial demonstration trying to get back the jobs of three women and the shop steward. I know people were manipulated but I think they should listen the workers' side of the story and then make conclusions. In the same meeting other workers talked about unofficial demonstrations and got applause. I want to ask the people who voted against us...what is the difference between those workers and us? I think we are class brothers and should support each other.

I am clear in my sense of solidarity: that is why I give solidarity to Visteon workers on the picket line, construction workers at their demonstration, SOAS deported cleaners during the occupation and rallies, RMT train workers on the picket line and RMT cleaners' demonstrations for the living wage.

Another thing that attracted my attention was about two weeks ago when I was in a meeting in Transport House about the SOAS campaign. One of the demands is to remove ISS (the cleaning contractor) and put the cleaning in house. It was a big surprise for me when one of Unite's security guards told me that he works for ISS, not for Unite.

At the National Shop Stewards Network's conference there was circulating a Unite Official leaflet saying bad things about the Willis campaign and I guess that is Jack Dromey's answer to the cleaners. It is very questionable that the union prefers investing in propaganda against workers instead of investing those resources trying to get better conditions for members.

days of defiance at lindsey

by Gregor Gall, professor of industrial relations, University of Hertfordshire

It's the dispute that just won't go away. For the third time this year, thousands of engineering construction workers have gone on unofficial strike, fighting for the right to work. This time round the dispute escalated dramatically unlike before, with the mass sacking of some 647 strike workers by two of the contractors working for Total, the Lindsey refinery operator.

On June 11th, some 1200 contractors at Lindsey walked out unofficially after a contractor gave notice of redundancies to 51 workers while another contractor on the same site was looking for 60 workers to fill vacancies. This broke the agreement that settled their earlier strike in February this year which compelled vacant work to be made available to those under threat from redundancy. The contractors and Total stated this was not the case.

And, the issue of the right to work, and the engineering construction workers' willingness to fight for this, was again to the fore in May as a strike by 50 ladders at Milford Haven started to snowball across other sites in Britain.

During the June 2009 strike, a growing number of engineering construction workers took solidarity action in support of their colleagues at the Lindsey refinery. At its height of 22nd-23rd June, the strike wave involved over 4,000 workers on just over 20 sites at power stations, chemical plants and oil refineries. The solidarity action spread by flying pickets going out from Lindsey, through using mobile phones, the networks between different sites established in the previous strikes and decisions taken at mass meetings. Picketing and mass picketing was in evidence.

The June 2009 dispute had two foremost dimensions. One was that the workers concerned were capable and willing, unlike many other workers (unionised or not), to take robust collective action to defend their right to work in the midst of a recession. This came down not just to being unionised but being well organised at the workplace level with shop stewards, mass meetings and a collective confidence to act. Underlying this is the nature of the labour market in the industry where job security is absent with building projects beginning and ending when completed, with employment contracts based on this.

The second was that the employers were militant and hard-nosed. During the first strike in January-February this year, Total and its concerned contractor (IREM) said they would not negotiate with the strikers' unions unless the workers went back to work. Shortly after they relented and a deal was eventually struck before the workers' returned to work. This time round, the situation has gone one step further, for the nuclear button was pressed with the sackings: reapply for your job by June 22nd at 5pm on the condition of ending the strike or consider that you've dismissed yourself. The nuclear option has been backed up by refusing to allow the conciliation service, ACAS, to get involved to resolve the dispute.

It is difficult not to read this as the employers wanting to take on, face down and defeat an assertive workforce once and for all. The reasons for this? The managerial prerogative – the right of management to manage as they see fit – is an obvious one. But behind this is surely the pressure to pursue profitability in a deteriorating economic environment. Com-

mon to all three disputes has been the keenness of the employers to undermine the national agreement for the industry that sets wage rates. In the first two disputes, the spark was the use of non-domiciled workers to do this. In the third, it was the more old-fashioned tool of aggressive management threatening job security to undermine the workers' demands.

This assessment is supported by the revelation that Total managers acted in a deliberate way to provoke an unofficial strike by stopping the transfer of soon-to-be made redundant workers to another contractor who was taking on exactly the same type of skilled workers. According to the GMB, Total managers went out of their way to make sure that what they (the managers) described as an 'unruly workforce' (i.e., those employed by the Shaws contractor) did not get further work. Provoking an unofficial strike means that workers can be sacked with impunity – unlike strikers on official lawful strike who cannot be sacked for the first eight weeks of a strike. This looked suspiciously like trying to lure workers into a trap.

One of the significant features of the strikes (again) was that the strikers threw caution to the wind by defying the anti-union laws: no ballots, no notification to the employer and so on. Instead, they voted with their feet. The strikes are unlawful on another account. The walkout at Lindsey in support of the 51 workers was solidarity action as was that by all the workers outside Lindsey, and by law, the workers erred here and because they had no 'trade dispute' with their own employer. On top of that, the laws on picketing and obstruction have been broken continually.

What then stands out is that no injunctions were threatened or applied for by any of the concerned employers, especially those affected by solidarity action outside Lindsey (as has their unwillingness to sack anyone either – although there was an unconfirmed report that some at Staythorpe had been sacked). This must have been for the fear of even further escalation producing a minor political crisis. Again, Unite and the GMB repudiated the action but in the same way as in January-February (with several inherent tensions), they still acted as negotiators for their striking members. What was different this time round was that both unions make the dispute (or a part of it) official when their members were sacked. Moreover, the GMB has launched a £100,000 hardship fund and said the dispute was official from the point that the sackings were made.

The mood of the Lindsey strikers showed no willingness to back down. The majority did not re-apply for the jobs by the deadline set by the company. Some went further and burnt their dismissal notices in a public display of protest.

In a time of general recession and with unemployment of some 25-30% in the engineering construction industry, this is serious stuff. Conventional wisdom say workers don't do this in these situations. Here the threat of unemployment and undercutting by non-domiciled workers has led these workers to do the opposite of what is the norm today.

Towards the end of the strike, both the GMB and Unite also pledged to organise a national, official ballot for industrial action on the issues of issue on pay and job security throughout the industry. This is likely to see a national strike by between 20,000-30,000 engineering construction workers.

A sign of the pressure on Total was that it changed its position on holding talks while the strike continued on 23 June

2009. Previously, it had insisted that these could only take place was the strikers returned (and on its terms). Delay to its desulphurization construction project had some bite and the contractors may well have been penalized for this by Total through the terms of the building contract.

Talks between the unions, Total, the two contractors and the employers' federation led to a climbdown by the employers and a victory for the strikers: re-instatement of the 647 sacked workers, employment for the 51 redundant workers and no victimisation for those taking part in solidarity action. But this was not a 'Total' victory, for the issues that gave rise to the strike have not been settled. In other words, this is just one battle in a much longer war.

Thus, the 51 Lindsey contractor workers at the centre of the dispute were offered just four weeks work, representing the 'natural' end to the project they were working on. Rather, what is needed is an agreement that leads to any 'at risk' workers being transferred to any new work available on the Lindsey site so that job security is manifest. Then, a national agreement along these lines is needed so that domiciled labour, British or otherwise, is employed and not spurned through the use of labour specifically brought in from abroad and paid on lower terms and conditions. Thus, an explicit and binding industry agreement that is not only watertight on this issue of job security but also has an independent body to monitor and enforce it is needed. This is what the unions mean when they talk about labour audits (but they have made no progress on this so far other than at Lindsey where the agreement was broken). Furthermore, the legal basis of the right of employers through the Posted Worker Regulations do exactly this must be overhauled.

Unless these conditions are met, and notwithstanding the disincentive to employers to undercut as a result of the militant action, the engineering construction workers will be bound to have to fight these battles again and again. In doing so, they will lose a considerable amount in wages and this is likely to disincline them to take sustained action.

One big push through a national official ballot, leading to action if necessary, to resolve these issues once and for all is what is really needed. But already the employers are saying they will play hardball by challenging the ballot. Skill, strategy and determination will be needed to see this fight through to the end.

One can speculate that a quicker and more fulsome victory could have been gained if the strikers had managed to get the production workers at the Lindsey oil refinery (or any other of its refineries – like in France) to come out in support. This would have kicked Total immediately in the pocket where it hurts and land the killer blow. The problem here is that these production workers were not in dispute and not affected by the same issues, particularly job security. Rather, they are employed on permanent contracts with reasonably well paid conditions.

So the June 2009 strike was a victory and builds on the earlier victories in the industry (and those at Visteon and Linamar) but we also need to see it in the cold light of day to realize that the underlying issues are far from settled.

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