

Sparks: don't let the unions block the struggle

Electricians have been protesting against the proposed 35% pay cut for 4 months. Vociferous early morning protests in London, Manchester, the North East, Glasgow and elsewhere, blockading or occupying building sites run by the 7 firms trying to impose a change in pay and conditions, a demonstration in London on 9th November coinciding with the students and wildcats and blockades of sites on 7th December.

In spite of this militancy, in spite of the fact that sparks were being asked to sign their new contracts by early December or lose their jobs (now put back to January), the Unite union did not ballot for strike action until November, and then only for its members working for Balfour Beatty, seen as the employers' ringleader, and only for a limited strike. Even with an 81% majority that vote was challenged and Unite are repeating the ballot, preventing an official strike on 7th December – but not the unofficial strikes and blockades at Grangemouth, Immingham, Cardiff, Manchester, London and many other places. In places workers refused to cross the pickets lines and despite heavy police presence many building sites were shut down.

The struggle so far

The strikes and protests which have gone on since 8 employers announced they wanted to leave the Joint Industry Board and impose lower pay and worse conditions through BESNA have been characterised by:

- repeated wildcat strikes;
- meetings outside building sites to ensure all sparks are aware of the threatened pay cut and to try and involve them in the struggle, and sometimes brief occupations or blockades. These meetings have become a focus for sparks to show their determination to struggle,

and for others to show their solidarity. An open mic has allowed a real discussion;

- a determined search for solidarity within the construction industry and beyond it. There has been a recognition that they need to get the solidarity of workers in other trades, and that they would be next if the pay cut is imposed on the electricians. Workers inside and outside the union would need to be involved, although this is seen in terms of getting them to join the union. And there has been a significant effort to seek solidarity of workers in other industries expressed in the strikes and demonstrations on 9th November to coincide with the student protest and the proposal to do the same on 30th alongside the public sector workers. At Farringdon on 16th November, although the numbers outside were smaller, some workers – including a group of Polish workers – refused to go in;

- supporters from Occupy London have been welcomed, and several hundred electricians marched to St Paul's to show solidarity with their protest.

The action on the 9th November showed all these tendencies, starting with a rank and file protest outside the Pinnacle near Liverpool Street after blocking the road it moved off to visit several other construction sites run by BESNA companies and held open mic sessions before joining the main Unite demonstration at the Shard. Several hundred sparks decided not to go to the union lobby of parliament but to join the students. They were immediately kettled and despite their best efforts most were contained and searched – apart from a few who escaped through a coffee shop. The ruling class really do want to keep us apart!

On December 7, as well as calling on sparks to come out the picket



at Balfour Beatty at St Cath's Birkenhead sought out NHS Estates workers to explain why they were picketing – and got a sympathetic hearing.

There is a media blackout of all this. Nothing on the pay cut. Nothing on the protests, blockades and occupations. Virtually nothing on the demonstration on 9th November, despite the notion that lobbying parliament would attract the media. It is typical of the media to keep quiet about a struggle that the ruling class think is a bad example to other workers. And what the sparks have done so far is certainly an inspiration.

No information passed through union channels either, despite platonic assurances of support from other unions – I tried asking pickets outside Great Ormond Street Hospital on 30 November and they knew nothing of the attack on the sparks, nothing of their struggle. We shouldn't be surprised.

Difficulties developing the struggle

Jobs are scarce, living standards are falling as inflation eats away at real wages, and all these attacks are presented as painful but necessary by politicians and media. This is true for the whole working class, but the difficulties faced in construction are much more acute. Thousands of militant workers have been blacklisted, and many of them remain unemployed, and this is a real intimidation against the whole workforce. Then there is the difficulty getting regular work, many are forced to subcontract (subbies) or work through an agency with appalling effects on their pay and conditions, and the potential for divisions among workers along these lines. Hardly surprising that many workers hesitate: *"Most of the lads are still not up for the unofficial action, a few boys are going down to London though ... The lads are coming round to the idea of the official strike. They are looking out for their jobs which is understandable"* (post on ElectriciansForum.co.uk).

This situation shows that the electricians' need to fight far more than the 7 or 8 BESNA firms that want to impose a 35% pay cut next year. The agencies already pay less, as do a large number of firms which are not part of the JIB, and those that are only fulfil its rules when it suits them: *"The JIB/SJIB set up is NOT working as it should, pure and simple!!!"* (post on the same forum).

Unite – are we really the union?

With the original deadline for workers to sign the new agreement looming and no official strike called sparks are getting extremely frustrated with the union. *"I day out wont in my opinion cause much harm, these firms will have plenty of notice of when & how many... IT MAY ALREADY BE TOO LATE"*, *"people are reluctant to join a union that is run by 'noddors' that will sell its members down the river for personal gain"*, *"I do not trust Unite one single bit to negotiate a deal that satisfies us. I have seen too many of their sweetheart deals in various industries. It is imperative that Rank and File members are party to any negotiations that take place"*. The union has been described as *"contemptible"* for its inaction and absence from the protests. On the other hand *"the union is far from perfect but it is all we have"*, there can be no Rank and File without the union and no union without the Rank and File.

So why do the unions keep behaving like this? One of Unite's greatest defenders on the forum tells us *"ffs stop the union bashing, they will be the ones around the table negotiating the deals..we all play our own part in one way or another but its Unite who will do the main stuff"* and *"Unite are there to make deals with union lads whose companies have a relationship with Unite, they are there for their members, Unite is not there to represent a whole industry or an agency"*. This is precisely the problem. Unions are there to negotiate with the bosses – workers have a walk on part, in the ballot or on militant demonstrations, but the main union business takes place behind their backs. And they are limited to making deals with unionised companies. The unions limit our struggle, divide it by job, by membership of this or that union, by this or that employer. But sparks are facing a 35% pay cut across the whole industry, on workers in or out of a union. And it is only one part of the attacks on the whole working class which needs to unite across all the divisions of trade or profession, of employer, regardless of membership of any particular union or none.

Rank and File Group

The struggle so far has been organised by the Unite Construction Rank And File Group, headed by a committee elected at a meeting in Conway Hall, London, in August and which has held meetings up and down the country. They took the view that *"It is now widely accepted that we can't and won't wait for the ballot, though we will all be glad when it comes. But until then we must step up the campaign to one of even more unofficial action, walkouts on sites with solidarity action from others"* (<http://siteworker.wordpress.com>). In September 1500 electricians walked out of Lindsey oil refinery to join a demonstration of electricians. Like the national shop stewards committee the Rank and File Group takes a very militant stance – at times at arm's length from the union and at times arm in arm. *"We are working for the same goals both the Rank & File Committee and the official unions. We are working for the same objective. Don't allow people to divide us"* said Len McCluskey outside the Shard on 9 November, despite the fact that Unite leaders have been conspicuous by their absence from most of the protests, apart from a few token showings, such as at Blackfriars in October.

The efforts of the Rank and File Group show the sparks' militancy, the determination of a minority to resist this attack. It also shows their attachment to the union and its methods of struggle, including the view that the aim of the struggle is negotiation between BESNA and Unite, and that convincing workers to struggle means recruiting them into the union. The dynamic of the struggle, as we have seen, goes far beyond trade union methods and even in a completely different direction with the attempts to link up with workers in other trades whether in a union or not and with other struggles, rather than confining the struggle to Unite members and their employers. The sparks' total rejection of the cut in pay and apprenticeships contrasts with Unite's assurance that they will discuss modernisation.

General assemblies to run the struggle, mass meetings open to all workers regardless of union membership, are the way for workers to take the struggle into their own hands, and to spread it to other workers. **9/12/11 From World Revolution 350**

Communism is not just a 'nice idea'

The author of the book produced by the International Communist Current '*Communism, not just a nice idea but a material necessity*' begins a discussion on what communism is not, what it is, and why it is the only alternative to the crisis of capitalist society.

Tent City University,

Occupy St Pauls

Thursday 22 December 2011, 6 - 7.30 pm.

Nearest Tube: St Pauls, LONDON

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