

Strikes at Heathrow

Class solidarity is our only defence

The media – the public voice of the state and the ruling class - have been venting their fury against the Heathrow strikers. How dare the workers there put class solidarity above the profits of the company? Don't they know that things like workers' solidarity and class struggle are out of date? All that sort of thing went out of fashion in the 70s didn't it? According to an executive from one of BA's rivals, quoted in the Sunday Times (13 August): "In many ways aviation is the last unreformed industry...It is like the docks, the mines or the car industry were in the 1970s". Why won't these Jurassic workers get wise to the fact that the principle of today's society is 'every man for himself', not 'workers of the world unite'?

It's strange though how this 'new' philosophy of freedom for every separate individual doesn't prevent the bosses from demanding absolute obedience from the wage slaves. Some media voices, it is true, have been a tad critical of Gate Gourmet's overt shoot-to-kill methods: when the food workers held a meeting to discuss how to respond to a management ploy aimed at their jobs, the meeting was locked in by security goons, and 600 workers – even those off sick or on holiday – were sacked on the spot for taking part in an unofficial action, some of them by megaphone. This is pretty high handed, but it's just a more open expression of a management attitude that is increasingly widespread. Workers at Tesco are facing the abolition of sick pay for the first three days off – other companies are looking with interest at this new 'reform'. Warehouse workers are being electronically tagged to make sure that not a second of company time is wasted. The present political climate – when we are all supposed to accept any amount of police harassment in the name of 'anti-terrorism' – will only increase the bosses' arrogance.

These attacks are not down to this or that set of bosses being especially 'greedy', or adopting 'American-style' methods. The growing brutality of attacks on workers' living and working conditions is the only way the capitalist class can respond to the world economic crisis. Wages must be kept down, productivity kept up, pensions slashed, unemployment pay reduced, because every firm and every country is involved in a desperate struggle to out-sell its rivals on a glutted world market.

And faced with these attacks, the solidarity of the workers is our only defence. The baggage handlers and other staff at Heathrow who walked out when hearing about the mass sackings showed a perfect understanding of this. They themselves have been subjected to the same kinds of attacks and they have been involved in similar struggles. The immediate effectiveness of their strike immediately revealed the power of the workers when they take united and determined action. It is the only basis for forcing the bosses to reinstate the sacked workers, and it will make airport bosses hesitate about launching similar attacks in the near future. Isolated in one category, workers are easy prey for the ruling class. The moment the struggle begins to spread to other workers, the picture is transformed.

Class solidarity: humanity's true hope

But there's an even more important meaning to workers' solidarity. In a society that is disintegrating all around us, where 'every man for himself' takes the form of terrorist bombs, racist assaults, gangsterism and random violence of all kinds, the solidarity of the workers across all trade, religious, sexual or national divisions provides the only antidote to this system, the only starting point for the creation of a different society, one based on human need and not the hunt for profit. Faced with a system sinking into generalised warfare and self-destruction, it is no exaggeration to say that class solidarity is the only true hope for the survival of the human race.

That this is by no means a **vain** hope becomes clearer when you look beyond the borders of Britain. Over the past two years, there has been a growing revival of workers' struggles after years of disarray. In the most important of them – the French workers' struggles against attacks on pensions in 2003, the German car workers' fight against redundancies – the element of solidarity has been fundamental. These movements confirm that the international working class has not disappeared and is not defeated.

Naturally the media have been trying to hide the significance of the solidarity actions at Heathrow. They started talking about the family ties between the food workers and the baggage handlers and other airport staff. These do exist but while the majority of the food workers are from an Indian background, the majority of the baggage handlers are 'white'. In short,

this was authentic class solidarity, cutting across all ethnic divisions.

The news broadcasts also tried to undermine the sympathy that other workers might feel for the airport employees by shining a spotlight on the sufferings of passengers whose flights were disrupted by the strike. When you've spent the best part of a year sweating away at a job of work, it's certainly no joke to find that your holiday plans have been thrown into chaos as well. Explaining their actions to other workers and the population in general is a task that all workers have to take on when they go into struggle. But they also have to resist the hypocritical media blackmail which always seeks to make them the villains of the piece.

The real role of the unions

If the ruling class doesn't want us to recognize class solidarity when we see it, there's another truth it tries to obscure: **that workers' solidarity and trade unionism are no longer the same thing.**

The methods used in this struggle were a direct challenge to the union rule book:

- the Gate Gourmet workers decided to hold a general meeting in their canteen in order to discuss the latest management manoeuvre. This was an unofficial assembly, held on company time. The very idea of holding general meetings where you discuss and take decisions goes against all official union practices;
- the other airport staff equally ignored these official guidelines by striking without ballots; and they further defied the union rulebook by engaging in 'secondary' action.

These kinds of action are dangerous for the ruling class because they threaten to take workers beyond the control of the unions, which have now become the 'official' – i.e. state-recognised - organs for keeping the class struggle under control. And in the recent period, there has been a steady increase in 'wildcat' actions of this type: the last major dispute at Heathrow, numerous strikes in the post; and at the same time as the latest Heathrow struggle, there were unofficial strikes among the bus drivers of Edinburgh and at the Ford foundry in Leamington Spa.

In the case of Heathrow, the TGWU succeeded in keeping a lid on the situation. Officially, it had to repudiate the unofficial walk-outs and urge the workers back to work. But with the help of 'revolutionary' groups like the SWP, the T and G has managed to present the struggle as being about 'union busting', identifying the victimisation of militant workers – which was certainly part of Gate Gourmet's strategy – with an attack on the union. This makes it easier for the rank and file union reps – most of who genuinely think that they are acting on behalf of their

fellow workers – to keep the struggle inside the union framework.

But what's brewing underneath these appearances is not a struggle to 'defend the unions', but increasingly massive movements in which workers will confront the trade union machine as their first obstacle. In order to build the widest possible class solidarity in and through the struggle, workers will face the need to develop their own general assemblies open to all workers, and to elect strike committees answerable only to the assemblies. Militant workers who understand this perspective now should not remain isolated, but should begin to get together to discuss it in preparation for the battles of the future.

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Contact the ICC

By post: BM Box 869, London WC1N 3XX

By e-mail: uk@internationalism.org

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