

Electricians: solidarity across industries is key

There is no doubting the level of the attack on electricians' jobs, pay and conditions involved in ending the Joint Industry Board agreement, which will lead to cuts of up to 35% and many jobs reclassified as semi-skilled or unskilled. Go to any of their weekly protests outside various construction sites, or read their discussion forums, and you'll hear just how disastrous it would be for workers already doing long hours of overtime in order to be able to afford house, car and necessities. "*Think we can kiss good bye to our houses cars family life etc.*", "*there will be no holidays or fooball or trips to the pub anymore. It will be a struggle to put new shoes on the childrens feet every few months*" (<http://www.electriciansforums.co.uk>).

When 8 big electrical contractors on construction projects announced they planned to pull out of the JIB and impose worse conditions, with Balfour Beatty sending out 90 day notices to their employees to accept a change of contract, there was a deafening silence from the union, Unite. Workers' indignation was obvious: "*I reckon that the Unions are up to their eyeballs in this as well*", "*the unions have been very quiet on this ... it stinks a bit*" (posts on 30.7.11).

Difficulty of developing a struggle

Ask about the fightback, and workers have often been exasperated that nothing seems to be happening, Unite has been delaying everything, and some fear that other sparks will not have the stomach for a struggle. Early morning protest meetings of 3-400 workers outside construction sites, the effort to persuade the workers on the need to join the struggle, and the opportunity for discussion and temporary blockades of the site entrances, every week for 3 months are not insignificant, but electricians have no illusion that this will push back the attack.

Electricians clearly face important difficulties in developing their struggle. To go into struggle today, in the face of an economic crisis with high unemployment, wages in general frozen or falling with inflation eating away at living standards takes courage for workers in any industry. In construction, with its traditions of subcontracting, creating divisions between directly employed and subcontractors, as well as blacklisting of militant workers, there are particular difficulties. It's been important to think about the experience of struggles in the 1970s and 80s: "*I spent a year of my life at your age fighting a strike that was doomed, and you are going the same way. Hardship you don't know the meaning of it son, I have seen men cry that they could not feed their kids and worrying how they would survive ... We fought our fight and we lost ...*", "*What the 70s & 80s had was membership who were prepared to accept the majority vote or show of hands, and walk, but even then not everyone showed at the picket line, and never an official of the union was seen on picket lines I stood on anywhere in the land !! ... Also if the fitters or the welders walked so did we, and vice versa!*" To develop today's struggle past defeats need to be confronted and the lessons drawn, as well as returning to positive experiences of what working class struggle means. The long strike, confined to one industry, was indeed a trap leading to bitter defeats like that of the miners in 1984 or the printers at Wapping. These were occasions when everyone did not walk out together, and even when different sectors were struggling at the same time – in '84 both dockers and car workers struck while the miners were out – they did not succeed in linking up.

Developing solidarity

Unofficial action started in the summer when the attack was announced and has continued with the early morning protests outside construction sites run by BESNA employers (those wanting to leave the JIB agreement) particularly in London, Manchester and Newcastle. These have provided a focus for workers to get together and discuss the struggle, with an open mike and workers listening to what is said. Workers in other industries, retired or students, and some anti-capitalist protesters have been able to come and show their solidarity – when a group from Occupy London turned up with a banner they had made

they got a cheer. They are an opportunity for those convinced of the need to struggle to discuss with and persuade others to join them, often with success. In London the protests have often marched from one site to another – such as from Blackfriars to Cannon Street. And several of those who have refused to cross into work have been victimised. They are also the occasion for a temporary blockade of the entrance.

But whose solidarity? For Unite, we need to lobby parliament, to seek the solidarity of the great and the good against "*rogue employers*" (Unite leaflet for 9th November demonstration). And indeed Jeremy Corbyn turned up to Blackfriars on 12th October to tell us about an early day motion. Are we seriously expected to believe that in the middle of an economic crisis, with workers in the public sector – including the NHS and education – facing attacks, that this is just a question of rogue employers who need to be reined in by the government?

Unite are not unaware of the push for solidarity, but their method is to wheel out the PCS deputy general secretary, Chris Baugh, to assure workers of his union's solidarity and propose public and private sector both take action on 30th November. Yet neither Unite nor the PCS, nor any other union, has done anything to overcome the media blackout of the attack or the struggle. What do public sector workers know of the attack on electricians or their efforts to fightback? Workers need to get together now and build links without the mediation of union leaders and their hollow speeches that can, and are likely designed to, make it seem that someone else can do it for them.

For *Siteworker*, which describes itself as a paper for site workers and trade unionists, it is clear it is not just 7 or 8 rogue employers: "*We would be naïve if we were not aware that the giant general construction companies, who run and absolutely control the industry, must have given their approval to this breakaway group...*" and therefore "*we can only succeed with other trades and occupations reinforcing our ranks and standing alongside us in working class industrial solidarity, in a union or not, in common cause and purpose.*" Understanding the need for workers to unite across such divisions is vital for the development of struggle, although this is seen in terms of uniting workers in the construction industry while the whole working class is under attack and needs to strike back together. And the way they see to unite those in a union with those who are not is to support union recruitment – despite their observation that Unite has largely been conspicuous by its absence from the efforts to struggle so far.

A *Siteworker* update special, noting that early morning meetings are not enough, proposed "*Stopping production is what will bring the big firms to the negotiation table*" but until then the blockades must continue – their jibelectrician.blogspot.com site notes how much various firms have lost through the disruption of these blockades. Meanwhile, after 3 months of regular protests, Unite is just starting to ballot for industrial action – but only electricians at Balfour Beatty, widely seen as the bosses' ringleader. Yet another division is being set up between those workers called into struggle and the rest. Striking to 'force' employers to negotiate with the union leaders is like demanding that the bosses sit down with another set of bosses, or the government, and expecting that you can get anything but another sell out "*as has happened in the past*" (*Siteworker*).

However strong the illusions remaining in Unite, or at least in its methods of struggle, the sparks have shown a real militancy and determination. This has been demonstrated in the effort to discuss in the protest meetings, the effort to convince other workers, and the attempts to seek solidarity within and beyond the construction industry – calls to join protests by students and public sector workers, welcoming other workers showing solidarity, and on 19th October making contact with Occupy at St Pauls. It is only the solidarity of the rest of the working class, and not MPs or union bureaucrats, that will scare the bosses into withdrawing any of their attacks. 5.11.11

It's not just the bankers, it's not just the Tories, **The struggle against capitalism is a struggle between classes**

Resistance against the present social order is spreading, from the huge social revolts in Tunisia and Egypt to the movement of the 'indignant' in Spain, to the general strikes and street assemblies in Greece, the demonstrations around housing and poverty in Israel, and the 'Occupy' movements across the USA, now echoed on a smaller scale in the UK. Awareness that this is a global movement is becoming sharper and more widespread.

In Britain, on 9 November, students will again be demonstrating against the government's education policies, and on 30th November up to three million public sector workers will be on strike against attacks on their pensions. For weeks now electricians have been holding noisy demos at building sites in defence of their jobs and conditions and will also be out in force on 9 November.

Not yet a revolution, not yet the 99%

The word 'revolution' is once again in their air, and 'capitalism' is once again being widely identified as the source of poverty, wars and ecological disasters.

This is all to the good. But as the exploited and oppressed majority in Egypt are being made painfully aware, getting rid of a figurehead or a government is not yet a revolution. The military regime that took over from Mubarak continues to imprison, torture and kill those who dare to express their dissatisfaction with the new status quo.

Even the popular slogan of the Occupy movement, 'we are the 99%', is not yet a reality. Despite widespread public sympathy, the Occupy protests have not yet gained the active support of a significant proportion of the '99%'. Millions feel anxious about the uncertain future offered by capitalism, but this very uncertainty also creates an understandable hesitation to take the risks involved in strikes, occupations and demonstrations.

We are only just glimpsing the potential for a real mass movement against capitalism, and it is dangerous to mistake the infant for the fully-grown adult.

But those who have already entered the struggle can also be held back by their own illusions, which the propagandists of the system are only too eager to reinforce.

Illusions such as:

'It's all the fault of the bankers and/or neoliberalism'.

Capitalism is not just the banks, or a 'deregulated' market. Capitalism is a social relation based on the wage system, on the production of commodities for profit, and it functions only on a world wide scale. The economic crisis of capitalism is a result of the fact that this social relation has become obsolete, a blockage on all future advance.

Regulating the banks, bringing in a 'Robin Hood Tax' or extending state control does not uproot the essential capitalist social relation between the exploited and their exploiters, and gives us a false goal to fight for. The unions' call for 'growth' is no better: under capitalism this can only mean the growth of exploitation and environmental destruction, and in any case, today it can only be based on the racking up of huge debts, which has now become a major factor in the deepening of the economic crisis.

'Right wing politicians are our main enemies'.

Just as the bankers are the mere agents of capital, so politicians from right to left are instruments of the capitalist state, whose only role is to

preserve the capitalist system. Cameron's Tories begin where Labour left off, and Obama, despite all the hype about the 'hope' he represented, continues the Bush administration's imperialist wars and assaults on living standards.

'We need to make parliamentary democracy work better'

If the state is our enemy, demands for its reform are also a diversion. In Spain 'Real Democracy Now' tried to get people to fight for an improved parliamentary list, more control over the selection of MPs etc. But a more radical tendency opposed this, recognising that the general assemblies which were everywhere the organising form of the protests could themselves be the nucleus of a new way of organising social life.

So how can the struggle advance? By recognising and putting into practice certain basics:

That the struggle against capitalism is a struggle between classes: on the one hand the bourgeoisie and its state, which controls the majority of social wealth, and on the other hand the working class, the proletariat – those of us who have nothing to sell but our labour power.

The struggle must therefore spread to those parts of the working class where it is strongest, where it masses in the largest numbers: factories, hospitals, schools, universities, offices, ports, building sites, post offices. The examples are already there: in the strike wave that broke out in Egypt, when 'Tahrir Square came to the factories', and they were forced to dump Mubarak. In Oakland in California where the 'Occupiers' called for a general strike, went to the ports and got the active support of dockers and truckers.

To spread the struggle, we need new organisations: the practice of forming assemblies with elected and mandated delegates is reappearing everywhere because the old organisations are bankrupt: not only parliament and local government, but also the trade unions, which serve only to keep workers divided and to ensure that the class struggle never exceeds the legal limit. To overcome union divisions and keep struggles under the control of the workers, we need assemblies and elected committees in the workplaces as well as on the streets.

To get rid of capitalism, we need revolution: The ruling class maintains its power not only through lies, but also through repression. Class struggle is never 'non-violent'. We have to be prepared right now to defend ourselves from the inevitable violence of the cops, and in the future, to overthrow the state machine by a combination of mass self-organisation and physical force.

The only alternative to capitalism is communism: Not state-controlled exploitation like under the Stalinist regimes, not a return to isolated communes exchanging their goods, but a world wide association of the producers: no wages, no money, no borders, no state!

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