

Spring the trap of isolation!

Despite endless chatter about the 'end of the recession', all the indications are that the present global system – capitalism – is in its deepest ever crisis and that there are no 'green shoots' in sight. One thing is certain however: faced with declining profits and savage competition over markets, the ruling class has one answer: make the exploited, the real 'wealth creators', pay through job-cuts, wage freezes, 'modernising' working conditions (i.e. get us to work harder for less) and massive reductions of the social wage through cuts in the public services. Tory, Labour, Lib Dems and the rest all agree on the need for public sector cuts – their only argument is how to go about it and how to sell it.

For the vast majority of us, there can also only be one answer: to resist these attacks on our living conditions, which will not lead to a more prosperous future, but to further impoverishment and misery. And the signs are that workers are beginning to resist, all over the world, from mass strikes in Egypt, Dubai and Bangladesh, to workers, unemployed and students organising themselves in general assemblies in France, Spain and Greece, and widespread strikes and tenants' revolts in South Africa. In Britain too the same signs are there: the oil refinery wildcats last winter, where workers extended the struggle in defiance of anti-strike laws and began to go beyond the nationalist ideas that had initially distorted the meaning of the strikes; the occupations at Visteon and Vestas, which attracted widespread support from other parts of the working class. And right now, there are struggles brewing or breaking out in a whole number of sectors: Leeds binmen; bus drivers in Essex, Yorkshire and the Northeast, all facing wage cuts; firemen walking out in protest against new shift patterns; tube workers and BA workers being balloted for strike action, and of course, the postal workers.

The attack on the postal workers

Of all the current struggles, the dispute at Royal Mail is the focus of enormous attention from politicians and media. Mandelson has expressed his 'massive anger' at the strikes, but Cameron is accusing Brown's government of being too soft on the postal workers. *Royal Mail bosses have taken the provocative step of hiring thousands of extra casual workers during the strikes.* The press and TV are banging the drum about the suicidal nature of the strikes and the hardships they are going to cause, even claiming that the strikes will put lives at risk because swine flu vaccines are being sent through the post.

This focus is no accident. The ruling class is perfectly well aware that there is a huge growth of discontent in the working class. It knows that this discontent can only grow when they start implementing the new rounds of cuts imposed by the economic crisis, above all in the public sector, which is the biggest employer of labour in the country. And it knows that the postal workers have a well-deserved reputation for militancy and self-organisation. In particular, postal workers have a long history of ignoring anti-strike laws and deciding on strike action in mass meetings rather than waiting around for ballots. That's why the state and the bosses are taking on the postal workers right now. They want to take them out in advance of having to deal with other sectors – isolate them, grind them down, and then cow them into submission, to prove to the rest of the working class

that fighting in defence of your living conditions is just self-defeating.

Trade unions reinforce isolation

Right now there is a real danger that the postal workers will be isolated – not least because the trade unions are reinforcing that isolation. When CWU boss Bill Hayes said that he was in a better position than Scargill was in 1984, he was actually strengthening the fatal illusion that led to the defeat of the miners: the idea that if you fight long and hard enough in one sector, you can push back a concerted attack by the whole ruling class. The opposite is true: the more you fight on your own, the more you are likely to be worn down and defeated. The more our rulers sense the danger of struggles extending across the working class, the more likely they are to back down and make concessions.

And yet in every sector, the unions argue as if every dispute was a separate issue, of interest only to 'their' members. In the post, the CWU – which agreed to a large chunk of the current 'modernisation' package at the end of the 2007 strike – is presenting the issue as one of 'consultation' and the particularly evil plans of RM management. In fact RM management, like all management, is just doing its job for the capitalist class and the state which protects it. Elsewhere, transport, fire and other unions are balloting their members over their own disputes with management, and preparing for strikes which they want to be tightly controlled by the union machinery and to remain unconnected to all the other struggles, even when they take place at the same time.

How can we spring this trap of isolation?

The issue isn't whether to fight or not to fight. *The issue is how to fight.* We need the maximum unity faced with a united attack by the ruling class. But to achieve this, we can't rely on the unions, who police the bosses' laws and embody the division of the working class into innumerable sectors and categories.

Instead, we need to follow the example of the postal workers in past struggles, or the oil refinery workers last winter, by ignoring anti-strike laws and making the mass meetings places where real decisions are made (*like whether to go on strike or return to work*) and any delegations or committees have to be elected and accountable to the mass meetings. We need mass meetings to be centres of debate and discussion, where workers from other sectors can come not only to show their support, but to discuss how the struggle can be spread. The same goes for picket lines and demonstrations: they should be open to all workers – *employed, unemployed, full-time or casual, and regardless of union affiliation* – and try to draw as many different sectors together into a common front.

Even if at first it's only small groups of workers who see the need for this kind of self-organisation and class unity, these groups can make links with each other and try to spread their ideas as widely as possible. The future lies in our hands!

International Communist Current: BM Box 869, London WC1N 3XX. E-mail: uk@internationalism.org. Next public meeting (on internationalism and WW2): 2pm, 14th November, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1.