

Strikes in oil refineries and power stations

The class struggle is for all workers!

The walk-outs and demonstrations by workers in oil refineries and power stations over the question of unemployment show the depth of anger in the working class faced with the tidal wave of redundancies brought about by the economic crisis.

This wave of lay-offs and short-time working is not confined to Britain but is engulfing the globe. From the USA to China, from western Europe to Russia, no workers' job is safe; and even when they have work, wages are being cut and working conditions worsened.

But workers around the world are showing their unwillingness to accept these attacks: there are daily strikes and demonstrations in China; at the end of January 2.5 million workers in France struck in protest about unemployment; students and young workers in Italy, France, Germany and above all Greece have been out on the streets demonstrating their rage against a society which offers them no future. The anger of the workers in the refineries is not specific to Britain but part of an international response to the deepening economic disaster.

Nationalism leads to a dead-end

However, the main slogan raised in the energy strikes – “British jobs for British workers” - can only lead the workers into a complete dead end.

The threat to the jobs of workers in the power industry or anywhere else does not come from a ship-load of Italian and Portuguese workers who are being used by a network of British, US, and Italian firms to cheapen labour costs. Capitalism doesn't give a jot about the nationality of those it exploits. It only cares about how much profit it can extract from them. But it is more than happy when workers are set against each other, when they are divided up into competing national groups. The idea of “British jobs for British workers” is directly opposed to the ability of workers to defend themselves. This is because they can only stand up for their interests if their struggles extend as widely as possible and bring all workers, regardless of nationality, into a common resistance against their exploiters. Workers in the UK have no interests in common with British bosses and the British state and everything in common with so-called ‘foreign’ workers, who face the same threat of unemployment and poverty because the crisis of capitalism is a world-wide crisis.

Trade unions peddle the nationalist delusion

The main force pushing the nationalist delusion in this conflict has been the Unite and GMB trade unions who have taken up Gordon Brown's slogan – itself filched from the British National Party – and placed it at the centre of the movement. This is not the first time the unions have tried to peddle the “British jobs for British workers” line. Last year building workers on a construction site at a power plant in Plymouth were laid off by the contractor. Other workers walked out in solidarity with their comrades. The union tried to argue that workers from Poland on

the site were taking “British” jobs. This rang very hollow when these Polish workers joined the strike. The union which had protested so loudly about British workers being laid off then made a deal with the bosses to get the striking workers back to work and to leave the laid-off workers unemployed.

The media have also played a big part in spreading the nationalist message. Normally they are very quiet when workers take unofficial action or engage in illegal solidarity strikes, but they have been giving maximum publicity to this conflict, constantly focussing on the “British” placards and slogans. .

Although there's no denying that the workers in the oil refineries and power stations have swallowed the nationalist bait to some extent, reality is much more complex, as can be seen from this statement by an unemployed worker protesting outside a Welsh power station: *"I was laid off as a stevedore two weeks ago. I've worked in Cardiff and Barry Docks for 11 years and I've come here today hoping that we can shake the government up. I think the whole country should go on strike as we're losing all British industry. But I've got nothing against foreign workers. I can't blame them for going where the work is."* (The Guardian On-line 20.1.2009). Other workers in the industry have themselves made the point that thousands of oil and construction workers from Britain are currently working abroad.

The future is the international class struggle

In the face of an economic crisis of devastating proportions, it is not surprising that workers will find it difficult to find the most effective way of defending themselves. The energy workers have shown a real desire to organise themselves, spread the struggle and demonstrate in support of comrades in other plants and other parts of the country, but the nationalist slogan they have adopted is going to be used against the whole working class and its ability to unite.

The ruling class has no solution to this crisis, a crisis of overproduction which has been gathering pace for decades. It can no longer conjure it away with further injections of credit – the resulting mountain of debt is obviously part of the problem. And closing each country up behind protectionist barriers – which is the logic of “British jobs for British workers” – was already shown in the 1930s to be a way of sharpening competition between nation states and dragging workers off to war.

The working class has no immediate or local solutions to the economic catastrophe. But it can defend itself against the attempts of capitalism to make it pay for the crisis. And by uniting in self-defence, across all divisions and borders, it can start to discover that it has a historic answer to the collapse of capitalism: an international revolution and a new world society based on human solidarity and not capitalist profit.

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Public meeting: February 14, 2.00pm

A new generation of proletarians in revolt across Europe

Friends of the Earth Warehouse, 54a Allison Street, Digbeth, Birmingham

www.internationalism.org