

Public meeting on lessons of the Lindsey oil refinery strike



Workers strike back

Public meeting on lessons of the Lindsey oil refinery strike

Keith Gibson, Lindsey strike committee

Jerry Hicks, left candidate for Unite (Amicus) general secretary

7pm Friday 13 February • Small Hall, Friends Meeting House • 173 Euston Road, NW1, opposite Euston station



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The heroic struggle by over 1,000 construction engineers in Lindsey oil refinery, supported by walk-outs in more than 20 other sites, has resulted in a victory for the workers. The deal has set the benchmark for dozens of other sites throughout Britain and Europe. It is a victory against the bosses of Total (the oil company that owns the site) but also against the whole regime that operates across the European Union. The strike has exposed the anti-union laws as irrelevant when the mass of workers move into struggle.

Fighting the race to the bottom

TOTAL TOLD the original contractor, Shaw's, that they had lost work to an Italian company, IREM, who would bring in their own workforce. Shaw's told the shop stewards that some of their members would be made redundant to make way for the Italian workers. What was crucial was not that they were Italian or Portuguese, but that they would not be part of the national agreement for the engineering and construction industry (NAECI). EU laws give the bosses carte blanche to bring in workers on less pay and worse conditions in the "host country" as long as the minimum conditions of their home country is applied. Strikers' demands included "all workers in UK to be covered by NAECI Agreement and all immigrant labour to be unionised".

What has been won

WORKERS HAVE been guaranteed half of the jobs available. Shop stewards can check that the Italian and Portuguese workers are on the same conditions as the local workers covered by the NAECI agreement. The union-organised workers will be working alongside the IREM-employed Italian workers and will be able to check conditions of the migrant workers. Shop stewards will be able to keep the Italian company in check by regular liaison meetings.

Capitalist politicians like New Labour business minister Pat McFadden bleat that the "principle of free movement" has been breached by the deal. He means freedom for the bosses to move labour about Europe to undermine pay and conditions and trade union organisation. This "freedom" has indeed been breached by the strike, which has struck a blow against the race to the bottom. Now there needs to be more co-ordination

amongst European unions and particularly the shop stewards organisations, at site level but also at national and an all-European level, in a massive campaign to spread the victory of the Lindsey workers across the whole country and the EU.

Economic recession

THIS STRIKE has broken out now because of the rapid onset of mass unemployment in this historic world economic crisis. In the past, workers looked to get jobs on other sites, although the blacklisting of union activists for different sites has led to many local battles. Now the whole workforce of 25,000 who specialise in the skilled construction engineering required on major projects such as oil refineries and power stations are aware that things are changing. At least 1,500 were unemployed. Total bosses were using the downturn in the economy to give the work to an anti-union company.

Workers' control or bosses' blacklist

THIS WAS a struggle for control of the workplace by the workers themselves. Strikers' demands included "union-controlled registering of unemployed and local skilled union members". The fight for this demand to be put into practice will be part of the ongoing struggle between the workers and the bosses. The alternative to union control over hire-and-fire is the bosses control it, and blacklist trade unionists across the industry.

Media misrepresentation

THE MEDIA gave prominence to the slogan used by some workers in the first days of the strike: "British jobs

for British workers". Whilst this slogan was never a demand of the strike, the media seized on this to present the strike as anti-foreign labour. No workers' movement is 'chemically pure'. Elements of confusion, and even some reactionary ideas, can exist, and have done in these strikes. But strikers repeatedly made clear that the strike was not racist or against migrant labour but against the exclusion of UK labour and against the undermining of the national agreement. The BNP, contrary to reports, was not welcome on the pickets.

The role of the Socialist Party

SOcialist Party member Keith Gibson was elected onto the strike committee and became its spokesperson. The Socialist Party distributed nearly 1,000 leaflets to strikers stating that the strike was not against foreign labour but to stop the race to the bottom, and that "Trade union jobs, pay and conditions for all workers" should be the slogan. Our leaflet also proposed a clear set of demands which were adopted by the strike committee and were carried at a mass meeting. After a couple of days, all the BJ4BW posters had gone. In their place were placards in Italian appealing to the Italian workers to join the strike, and "Workers of the world unite".

Shamefully, some on the left preferred to believe the capitalist press and dismissed the strike as reactionary, racist or xenophobic. If the Socialist Party had not intervened there are dangers that such attitudes could have strengthened. Instead a marvellous victory has been achieved that lays the basis for unionising the foreign workers and strengthening class unity.



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