

Hard lessons from the Liverpool docks lock-out

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There are crucial lessons to be learned from the bitter end of the long-running industrial dispute on Liverpool's Mersey docks. The action by 329 stevedores, locked out for 28 months, ended on January 26 after they agreed to a meagre £28,000 (US\$46,000) settlement from the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company (MDHC). The men were sacked in September 1995 for refusing to cross a picket line mounted by 80 of their co-workers, sacked previously by Torside, a labour contracting company.

The dispute joins a long list of defeated workers' struggles over the last two decades. Yet the middle class left in Britain and internationally, who hailed Liverpool as the rebirth of "fighting" trade unions, are incapable of explaining why this has happened.

The Socialist Party (formerly the Militant tendency) claim that nothing else could have been done and that the lesson is that "the union needs reclaiming" for the working class. The Socialist Workers Party describe Liverpool as "symbolic of the collective solidarity inside the working class movement" that will convince the employers that they cannot "get away with this sort of behaviour."

Employers have drawn entirely the opposite conclusion. Almost immediately after the Liverpool dispute ended, the National Farmers Federation (NFF) of Australia, backed by the country's largest employers, launched a major assault on working conditions at Melbourne's Webb Dock. NFF chief Don McGauchie said that Liverpool proved that the International Transport Federation (ITF) and its affiliated unions were a "paper tiger."

This verdict is entirely justified. It was the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) which strangled the Liverpool dockers' struggle. The union did not even officially recognise the struggle, citing Britain's

antiunion laws as justification. The sole concern of the TGWU was to avoid any financial penalty and resume its previous close working relationship with MDHC. Around 800 other TGWU members in the port were instructed to continue working throughout the lockout.

The TGWU was able to control every aspect of the dispute, through the Mersey Port Shop Stewards Committee, which declared at the start that it was "100 percent in solidarity" with the national leadership. Shop stewards' leader Jimmy Nolan warned "left groups" against "cutting across our line" of abiding by the TGWU's dictates, an injunction which they all honoured.

Those leading the dispute never sought industrial support from any other section of workers in Britain. Instead the Mersey stewards organised an international campaign under the auspices of the ITF aimed at winning backing from trade union bureaucrats in other countries.

The stewards claimed that staying within the confines of the trade unions would provide a wide international audience for the dockers and force a retreat by MDHC from its plans to casualise the dock work force. All this policy succeeded in accomplishing was to ensure the workers' isolation.

The vast majority of workers who stand outside the official labour movement remained unaware of the Liverpool action, even when unions in their country nominally backed it. Organised workers were themselves reluctant to take solidarity action, having become justifiably sceptical towards the possibility of mounting militant struggles through the trade unions. Bitter defeats like that of the miners in Britain, often followed by victimisation, have left them with valid doubts about the ability of trade union struggles in and of themselves to provide an answer to their problems.

In the final months of the lock-out, hopes were raised that the election of a Labour government would bring a successful resolution of the conflict. The dockers appealed for Labour to use its 14 percent share holding in MDHC to force reinstatement of the sacked men. Instead Tony Blair's government urged TGWU leader Bill Morris to bring the embarrassing dispute to a hasty end at the dockers' expense. All hardship payments were stopped and the dockers were forced to accept the permanent loss of their jobs. No financial settlement whatsoever was offered to those employed by Torside.

The union bureaucracy has engineered one defeat after another in order to demonstrate the unions' continued usefulness to management as an industrial police force. Liverpool again confirms that the unions no longer serve the interests of their members, but rather those of a privileged bureaucracy. But this problem cannot be answered by exhorting the working class to "reclaim the unions."

The source of the decay and impotence of the trade unions lies in fundamental changes taking place at the very heart of the capitalist system. Over the past two decades, the drive to maximise profits and secure market domination has driven companies to internationalise their operations by utilising new developments in technology. Today workers face transnational corporations that comb the world for the cheapest labour, lowest taxes and biggest subsidies, and demand the removal of all barriers to their profit making. In contrast, the trade unions are wedded to the nation state. In this lies the basic source of the transformation of the unions into agents of capital, which is amply demonstrated in the TGWU's role on the docks.

From the 1980s onwards, dockworkers have seen their living standards and wages systematically destroyed. In order to preserve their lucrative relations with the dock companies, the trade unions abandoned any defence of their members and imposed speedup and job cuts. Between 1983 and 1989, for example, the number of dockers in Britain declined from 14,631 to 9,400, while tonnage handled per dock worker trebled.

In 1989, the need to remain internationally competitive dictated a massive drive to rationalise the docks industry and end the regulated labour market that had previously existed. The TGWU sabotaged a national strike in order to secure a niche for itself

within this new set-up. TGWU officials were often instrumental in setting up labour supply companies that gave them a direct role in exploiting the docks work force. On the Mersey, Torside contractors were established with the direct collaboration of the TGWU. This opened the door to casualisation and a constant drive to undermine working conditions that culminated in the events of September 1995.

So long as the dockers' dispute was confined to a trade union perspective, its defeat was inevitable. In their efforts to boost the credentials of the trade unions, the middle class left share responsibility for this debacle.

The real lesson of Liverpool is that new and genuinely democratic class struggle organisations, independent of the old union apparatus, are necessary to defend jobs, living standards and democratic rights.

Such organisations must be based on the recognition that the working class is engaged in a struggle against the profit system as a whole and must formulate its own independent political response. No effective counteroffensive against the employers is possible without workers undertaking the construction of their own mass socialist party in opposition to the parties of big business. For this, the working class must transcend the narrow confines of trade unionism and adopt a perspective for international workers' unity and social equality.



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