

Britain: Sheffield steel workers locked out following dispute over pay cuts

Robert Stevens
2 June 2001

Foundry workers at William Cook in Sheffield, South Yorkshire, have been locked out and sacked after holding an initial protest against a massive pay cut.

The dispute began in August 2000, when the company demanded a £50 (\$71) a week pay cut from the workers. Company chairman Andrew Cook, who claimed the cut was necessary for the survival of the firm, said the high value of the pound was severely affecting its ability to export its products.

The Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU), representing the majority of the workers, accepted this rationale. In January this year, the company demanded a further reduction in pay of £80 (\$113) per week. Workers at the firm's Heavy Foundry site, and subsequently at the IMF Foundry, rejected this, voting unanimously to reject the pay cuts. Some 99 workers held several one-day strikes in April and also organized a work to rule in protest.

Following their action, they received termination of contract notices and were locked out of the foundries by management. Andrew Cook offered the workers their jobs back, but only on the basis that they sign new contracts doing away with many of their previous conditions of employment. The company then took out a high court injunction limiting the size of any future picket lines to six.

A ballot of the workers at the company's main Greensand Foundry, William Cook's largest Sheffield plant, was organised, seeking their support for action short of a strike in solidarity with the strikers. But the company is threatening to take the union to the High Court, saying the ballot is unlawful since the AEEU sent out some ballot forms to workers who were no longer employed by William Cook. The union is now organising another ballot of the Greensand workers. The striking workers are presently appealing against their dismissal, and a hearing at an industrial tribunal is set for June 7.

Since the workers were dismissed, the company has advertised their jobs in the local press and has now recruited around 15 strike breakers. These are being paid an initial rate of £6 (\$8.50) an hour, and following a probation period will revert to basic pay of £4.25 (\$6) an hour plus piecework rates.

William Cook is the world's largest steel foundry group and exports about 45 percent of its production, split mainly between Europe and the US. It employs some 3,000 staff in the UK and supplies firms in the aerospace, automotive, defence, heavy engineering, forestry, power generation and other industries. The company is now demanding similar cutbacks to those it has imposed in Sheffield at some of its other plants.

Throughout the dispute the company has issued a number of threats against the workforce following their initial strike action. Speaking about the new contract, Andrew Cook told the press that other workers in the William Cook group would share the same fate as their locked-out colleagues if they protested. Commenting on the proposed ballot at the main Greensand foundry he said, "If there's any nonsense with that foundry joining in the dispute, they're signing their own employment termination warrant."

In Sheffield, the Socialist Alliance (SA), an electoral umbrella of left wing groups led by the Socialist Workers Party, and which purports to represent an alternative to the Labour Party, has focused on the William Cook dispute as part of their general election campaign. On May 24, the SA held a support meeting for the William Cook workers. Platform speakers and members of the Socialist Alliance in the audience said the strike action taken by the William Cook workers showed the way forward. Most contributions were limited to promising financial support for the strikers and calling for a protest march.

A member of the Socialist Equality Party who spoke

from the floor said the lessons of the past period demonstrated that what was required was a political struggle against the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy. Just as Labour had become the party of big business, so the unions had been transformed into the extended arm of management. In response, a member of the Socialist Alliance asserted, "You cannot compare the Labour Party with the unions. The unions have got workers in them".

Such a position serves to blind workers to the political role the trade unions play.

The arrogance evinced by management at William Cook's reflects the perfidious actions of the AEEU in isolating the locked-out workers. The William Cook dispute is the latest in a series of industrial struggles over the past decade or more that have seen workers first locked out then sacked after taking industrial action in response to cutbacks and attacks on their employment rights. In all these cases, the role of the trade unions involved has been to isolate those in dispute, refusing to mobilise other sections of workers in their defence. All the unions now routinely justify their inaction by citing the necessity to comply with the draconian anti-union legislation introduced by Thatcher, and kept on the statute books by Labour.

The most prominent of these lockouts was the Liverpool dockers' dispute between 1995 and 1998. The dockers were originally dismissed in September 1995 for refusing to cross a picket line mounted by 80 of their co-workers, who had been made redundant by Torside, a labour contracting company. They carried on their dispute for some 28 months, before it ended in defeat in January 1998. The Transport and General Workers Union refused to even officially recognise the dispute, claiming that to do so would mean contravening the anti-union laws, and would therefore threaten its assets.

The AEEU was formed in 1992, through a merger between the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) and the electricians and plumbers Union, the EETPU, which have a long history supplying the most right wing representatives of the trade union bureaucracy. In 1986, Rupert Murdoch's News International group sacked the entire production workforce at its Fleet Street plant and moved production to new premises in Wapping. The EETPU achieved notoriety when it then signed a single-union no-strike agreement to represent the scab workforce at Wapping. The sacked print workers included 300 members of the AEU.

Upon the occasion of the merger of the AEU and the

EETPU, the president of the newly formed union, Bill Jordan said, "The AEEU will change the face of British trade unionism and forge a new kind of partnership with employers". The union has since been at the forefront of accepting single-union, no-strike deals with companies such as auto manufacturers Toyota and Rover. The AEEU's current General Secretary Sir Ken Jackson declared in 1999 that there would be "no return to the bad old days. Workers want to work, they don't want to strike. I want to see a strike-free future for British industry."

William Cook workers should also remind themselves of the AEU/AEEU's treatment of its members who were locked out following a dispute at the Keeton engineering company. The union left the workforce to rot outside the company gates for eight years between 1986 and New Year's Eve 1994, before the few remaining strikers were forced to give up on their failed dispute.

Steel workers at William Cook face a struggle on two fronts: against the attacks of the company on their conditions and against the leadership of the AEEU. The union has once again done nothing to mobilise any of its 730,000 members against this lockout, even within the company itself, and has refused to take any action to prevent the recruiting of scabs, whom the AEEU no doubt hopes to represent after the dispute.

Either the strikers appeal over the heads of the union leadership for solidarity action from the entire William Cook's workforce and other sections of workers, or they too will face isolation. To limit the action within the confines of the AEEU and the anti-union laws will only ensure that they lose their jobs.

The William Cook strikers are holding a protest march and demonstration in Sheffield on Saturday June 2, starting at 12.00 at the Town Hall.

Please send any messages of support/donations to the strikers' shop steward, Martin Fiddler at 61 Penistone Road, Grenoside, Sheffield S35 8QH



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact