

Trade unions extend nationalist campaign to defend “British jobs”

Robert Stevens
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Recent unofficial strikes, which began at the Lindsey oil refinery in Lincolnshire, England, and spread to power stations and oil refineries across the UK were conducted based on the demand “British Jobs for British workers.”

While nominally “unofficial,” they were fully endorsed by the Unite and GMB trade union bureaucracy.

The *World Socialist Web Site* opposed these strikes and explained that the legitimate grievances of workers against rising employment were consciously being diverted into a noxious right-wing campaign antithetical to their class interests. Following the strike, Unite organised official action and demonstrations on February 11 at two power stations currently under construction, one at Staythorpe in Newark, Nottinghamshire, and the other at the Isle of Grain in Kent.

According to the union, around 400 “skilled but unemployed construction workers” blocked the main gate at Staythorpe, while some 70 unemployed workers demonstrated outside the Grain Power Station.

At both of the sites, Alstom is the main contractor. The company is using two subcontractors at each of the sites.

At Staythorpe, Alstom was contracted by RWE to build the gas-fired station. Alstom then subcontracted the work on the site project to two Spanish companies, Montpresa and FMM.

At the Isle of Grain, the contract was awarded to Alstom by the power company E.on to build the power station. Alstom then subcontracted some work to the Polish firms Remak and ZRE Katowice.

A statement issued by Unite on February 10 said of Montpresa and FMM and the dispute at Staythorpe, “These two non-UK contracting companies say they have no intention of employing any local labour to undertake the work.”

Unite said it estimated “that 600 jobs will be needed to build the power station’s turbine and boiler (Montpresa will fit the turbine and FMM will fit the boiler) and another 250

to build the pipe connecting the two. None of these jobs will go to UK workers.”

On the dispute at the Grain Power Station, it added, “Two sub-contractors, Remak and ZRE, have also refused to consider applications for work from UK-based labour. Unite estimates that the two sub-contractors will require 450 workers over the lifetime of the project.”

The joint general secretary of Unite, Derek Simpson, spelled out what it is that the union is demanding. “Alstom has the power to insist that the sub-contractors end this scandalous situation. UK-based labour must be given a fair chance to get a cut of the action to build a new generation of UK power stations”.

As with the Lindsey dispute, the trade unions have attempted to portray the disputes at Staythorpe and Grain as based on defending trade union rights and conditions and a protest against unscrupulous employers who import cheap labour.

During the Lindsey strike, it emerged that the Unite trade union official Bernard McAuley was involved in three meetings with IREM, the Italian firm at the centre of the dispute, prior to the action. According to reports in the media, McAuley negotiated agreements on the terms and conditions of the 140-strong Italian workforce at Lindsey.

Alstom has denied the claims of the trade unions and has said that its employees, whether British or European, are paid the same rates. The company said last week, “For the Staythorpe and Grain construction sites British workers will carry out two-thirds of the work from start to finish. The claim that we discriminate against British workers is simply not true.”

The most recent statement issued by the “Britons first” campaign underlined the thoroughly reactionary nature of this movement. On February 13, a statement was issued on the *ConstructionWorkerUK/bearfacts.co.uk* website entitled “Staythorpe Campaign Bulletin of the joint trade unions UNITE and the GMB.”

The statement said of Alstom’s claim that two thirds of the workforce on the site will be British, “This is not the case in

regard to engineering construction workers. We believe that FMM and Mompresa will utilise around 400 workers on the turbine and the boiler, Alstom 250 on the scope transmission work all utilising exclusively overseas labour. We are led to believe that the Balancer plant is about to be awarded to an Italian firm. Obviously all eyes will be on where they source their workforce. These figures are difficult to reconcile with the Alstom statement.”

The statement then called for construction workers to attend further planned demonstrations and made it clear that these protests were being supported by a substantial number of British corporations. It continued, “Some employers are offering tacit support to the aims of our campaign by taking a relaxed attitude to a proportion of their workforce attending our protests.”

It added, “I have been requested to explain that we could minimise the financial strain on our members and also keep our relationship with the more enlightened employers on an even keel if we had delegations from many sites in attendance at the regular protests, rather than lots of workers from one site.”

The statement also called for workers to support and attend the planned “March for Jobs, Justice & Climate” being organised by the Trade Union Congress on March 28.

“This event is an appropriate vehicle for us to demonstrate our anger at the negative impact that globalisation in the shape of multinational construction companies is having on our employment prospects,” it states. “Globalisation is what is behind the attack on our agreement and is the root cause of all of the issues we are currently facing.”

Denunciations of globalisation and demands for a “Britons first” employment policy translate into a protectionist strategy that can only have the most devastating consequences for all workers, regardless of nationality.

Global corporations are indeed involved in a bitter struggle for markets and in order to maintain profitability and survive. But sowing national divisions amongst workers facilitates this process by pitting each against all and asserting shared interests between workers and corporations based in “their” nation. The logic of economic nationalism is war, with workers sent to kill each other on behalf of various national capitalist cliques.

The struggle of the working class is of necessity an international one and must be based on a defence of the common interests of all workers against the world capitalist system.

The nationalist perspective of the Unite and GMB trade unions is shared by the entire trade union bureaucracy. In the last week, the Rail, Maritime and Transport Worker (RMT) trade union launched a campaign against the awarding of a £7.5 billion government contract to Agility Trains, a group

that includes John Laing Plc, Hitachi Ltd. and Barclays Plc.

The contract is to build “Super Express” train carriages, the replacement for the rail network’s Intercity 125 trains. The government claimed that the contract and maintenance of the trains would lead to the creation of 12,500 jobs.

Agility Trains and the Brown government have stated that 70 percent of the value of the contract would be spent in Britain, but the RMT and sections of the Labour Party have opposed the deal on the basis that workers in Japan will also be involved in the manufacturing of the trains. They are employed by Hitachi.

The RMT stated that it wanted to know why the bid failed from Express Rail Alliance, which brings together rolling stock manufacturers Bombardier and Siemens, leasing firm Angel Trains and financiers Babcock & Brown. Bombardier, a Canadian engineering group, has a factory in the UK employing 2,200 people.

Justifying the protest, RMT General Secretary Bob Crow graphically illustrated how the economic nationalism of the trade unions complements and exacerbates a drive towards trade war by the major powers. He said of the contract, “We have been campaigning long and hard to protect what is left of Britain’s train-making capacity and skills base.... We need to know why the order was not placed with Bombardier, which has established train-building capacity and a skilled workforce in Derby. If Japan can manage to ensure that high-speed fleet that operates on its own railways are manufactured entirely at home there is no earthly reason why Britain cannot either.”

Crow’s statement was echoed by Bob Laxton, the Labour MP for Derby North, who commented, “This is a crass decision which gives the Japanese an opportunity of getting into the UK market. I don’t believe for one moment the figure of 12,500 jobs because work will be brought into the United Kingdom from overseas.”

The same RMT that now claims to stridently defend jobs at Bombardier refused to mount any campaign in Derby in 2004 when the same company shed 1,000 jobs. The losses were part of a worldwide restructuring by Bombardier, which led to the closure of 6 of its 35 plants in Europe. Earlier this month, the firm cut a further 300 jobs at the aerospace division of its Belfast factory in Northern Ireland.



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