

British unions back reactionary strikes against foreign workers

2 February 2009

The strike at the Lindsey Oil Refinery in Lincolnshire and solidarity actions taken throughout the UK, nominally unofficial but fully supported by the unions, represent a dangerous outburst of nationalist sentiment for which the union bureaucracy is wholly responsible. The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party unequivocally oppose these actions.

The thousands of workers involved have legitimate grievances and fears for their future. One UK contractor has reportedly shed a third of its workforce at the Lincolnshire site. But these concerns are being manipulated by the union bureaucracy for the most reactionary ends—to promulgate nationalism and economic protectionism as the supposed answer to the worsening crisis of British and world capitalism. The only possible result of such a movement is to pit workers in Britain against their class brothers and sisters in other countries and line British workers up behind their employers in a conflict for the lion's share of markets that are in a state of near-collapse.

Far from safeguarding jobs, the unions are encouraging workers to engage in a fratricidal competition for a diminishing pool of jobs that will inevitably involve acceptance of cuts in wages and conditions demanded by the major corporations.

The Lindsey action began when 600 refinery workers walked off the job to protest the arrival of some 100 Italian and Portuguese workers employed by Irem, an Italian subcontractor which had won a £200 million contract from the Total oil company to construct a desulphurisation unit. Irem was one of seven subcontractors—five British and two European—which made bids. It is expected to employ a further 300 specialist Italian and Portuguese workers on the project.

The job action has spread nationwide, with up to 3,000 workers at oil refineries, gas terminals and power plants staging sympathy strikes and protest actions in support of the Lindsey workers. In addition, 900 employees at the Sellafield nuclear power plant have voted to walk out Monday.

The central demand being put forward by the unions is encapsulated in the slogan “British jobs for British workers.” This echoes a speech by Prime Minister Gordon Brown at the 2007 Labour Party conference.

The walkouts are illegal under the anti-union laws brought in by the Conservatives and upheld by the Labour government. But despite their unofficial status, there is no doubt as to who is responsible for the nationalist tenor of the actions. Top officials from Britain's largest trade union, Unite, have addressed the

demonstrations and official trade union banners have been prominent at protests and rallies.

Unite issued a statement on January 30 calling for “a national protest in Westminster” against what it describes as the “immoral, potentially illegal and politically dangerous practice of excluding UK workers from some construction projects.” The leader of Unite, Derek Simpson, said that the government “needs to make it absolutely clear that skilled British workers will not be excluded from construction work at UK plants.”

Bernard McAuley, the regional official most closely associated with the dispute, declared, “If we lose this battle, our industry will go to the wall ... We want jobs to be given to local people first.”

Such is the chauvinist character of the union's demands that the dispute has been lauded by the fascist British National Party (BNP), which has hailed the action as “a great day for British nationalism.”

The trade union leaders have attempted to distance themselves from the BNP, with Trades Union Congress (TUC) General Secretary Brendan Barber stating, “Unions are clear that the anger should be directed at employers, not the Italian workers.”

These efforts are as transparent as they are cynical. The championing of nationalism and insistence on the supposedly shared interests of British employers and British workers is the very centre of the trade union bureaucracy's perspective. It is responsible for creating the toxic climate in which the BNP can appear on picket lines posing as friends of the “British worker.”

The slogan “British jobs for British workers” cannot be interpreted as anything other than a rallying cry against foreign workers. If the unions were to be honest as to their real concerns, their slogan would be “British contracts for British firms.” With 60 percent of oil refineries due to be modernised, the Unison union has demanded that contracts be awarded to British firms.

The unions claim that their championing of British companies is a means of defending British jobs. It is not. In reality, the unions' nationalist and class collaborationist programme is responsible for job losses at Lindsey, within the oil refinery industry as a whole and throughout the UK.

For decades the trade unions have insisted that no struggle can be waged to oppose wage cuts, speedup and job losses as such measures are necessary to maintain the profitability and competitiveness of British industry. In the past few months hundreds of thousands of jobs have been shed without a single struggle being mounted by the unions, which have instead offered to accept wage cuts and shorter hours.

The unions have utilised every opportunity, including the situation facing refinery workers, to dragoon the working class behind the very companies that are implementing these cuts.

If one believed the union leaders one would think that the only threat to jobs comes from overseas companies that are employing “foreign workers.” It is the only issue that exercises them.

Earlier this month, the German firm Eon contracted the French firm Alstom to build a gas-fired plant near Grain in Kent. Alstom then subcontracted the project to the Polish firm Remak. The Unite union declared: “You have a situation where UK customers are paying extortionate energy bills to a German energy giant, who contracts a French multinational to build its new power stations who then employs a Polish subcontractor who, we fear, will bring in workers from abroad instead of giving local workers a chance to apply for work. Who is benefiting from this globalisation?” On January 19, Unite organised a demonstration at the Staythorpe power station building site in Nottinghamshire to protest against the use of foreign contractors.

Unison has asserted that the main reason Irem won the Lindsey contract is that it is paying its workforce at a lower rate. Though the actual contract is a commercial secret there is good reason to dispute this claim.

Total insists that all 400 Irem staff have the same pay and working conditions agreed by the unions for the existing contractor workforce. According to the February 1 *Daily Mail*, Bernard McAuley of Unison is well aware of this, having attended three meetings to ensure that the Italian workforce “was paid the same as British skilled engineers, electricians and pipe-fitters.”

Total has stated that Irem won the contract because it was “the most appropriate company to complete this work” and has singled out the fact that Irem could supply its own permanent workforce. This is considered preferable to employing contract labour, as is the norm in Britain thanks to the refusal of the unions to combat the spread of casualisation. The unions have sought to conceal this fact by complaining that British workers were not given the right to apply for jobs at Irem, i.e., that the firm has not casualised its own workforce!

Irem has responded by advertising some jobs in Britain, but in any event the European Union Posting of Workers Directive allows an EU firm to employ its own staff on a temporary project in another EU state, provided that it abides by local employment regulations.

It should be added that all competitive tender contracts are won on the basis of who can complete the contracts the most efficiently and cheaply. Had one of the British companies won the contract by submitting the cheapest bid, based on the greatest level of exploitation of the workforce, the unions would no doubt have declared this a victory for “British workers.”

The real reason the unions have chosen to make a major issue of this contract is their concern for propping up their shrinking dues base and the fat salaries and perks for union officials that it sustains and their determination to promote economic nationalism as a means of diverting British workers from a struggle against the British ruling elite while helping international capital split the working class.

Those who may be confused by the efforts of the union

bureaucracy to claim that theirs is not a campaign directed against Italian and Portuguese workers should ask themselves: How will the demand for “British jobs for British workers” be understood in Italy, France Germany and elsewhere throughout Europe? Will it not promote the demand for reciprocal action to be taken against British workers?

There are two million British citizens living and working in Europe, the highest number of expatriates of any EU state. Millions more Britons live and work throughout the world. Conversely, there are hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals in Britain and millions of British citizens of overseas descent. Will they be the next target in the campaign to secure “British jobs for British workers?” Right-wing Labour MP Frank Field has already demanded that Brown respond to the protests by “protecting our borders,” restricting employment of foreign nationals and letting no skilled migrant into the country without a job.

The primary and over-riding concern of working people everywhere must be to oppose the spread of nationalism, chauvinism and racism. With the world economy having entered into a slump without parallel since the 1930s, with millions of workers internationally being thrown out of work and losing their livelihoods, the call for workers to defend British employers and British jobs pits them headlong into a fratricidal battle with devastating consequences. It is a recipe for protectionism, trade war and, ultimately, military conflict.

The allies of workers in Britain are not the heads of the corporations, British or otherwise, but their fellow workers throughout Europe and internationally. Jobs, wages and conditions can be defended only by those measures that take forward the struggle to unite the working class across all national, ethnic and religious divisions in a common front against the corporations and all of the political parties that uphold the interests of the financial elite. The central perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the struggle to replace capitalist Europe with the United Socialist States of Europe, to safeguard the jobs, wages and working conditions of all workers.

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