The “Britons first” dispute: What constitutes a progressive defence of jobs?

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Contractors protesting the use of foreign labour at the Lindsey oil refinery, Lincolnshire, are to return to work after management promised an additional 102 jobs would be made available to British workers. The Unite and GMB trade unions at the centre of the protests declared the outcome a victory and have promised to extend their campaign to other sites across the UK.

Few details are available, but the posts are said to be new jobs, with none of the Italian workers currently employed affected. European Union and British law forbids discrimination on grounds of race and nationality. It is claimed instead that the jobs will be "open" to local workers.

Notwithstanding banners and placards demanding "British jobs for British workers"—a pledge made by Prime Minister Gordon Brown to the Trades Union Congress in 2007—the unions argued the protests were not directed against foreign nationals. They insist that the strikes, which involved hundreds of contractors across the UK, were really about defending trade union rights and conditions against their under-cutting by unscrupulous employers, importing cheap labour.

EU law, drawn up to protect the interests of the major corporations, intentionally facilitates such practices. But the unions have been careful not to make this charge directly against the companies targeted in the latest protests, and have not produced any evidence to support their claims.

Everything points to the fact that the legitimate concerns of workers over the growing economic recession and resulting job insecurity have been diverted by the trade union bureaucracy into a divisive protest aimed at shoring up the bureaucracy's own interests and those of British companies competing with foreign rivals for construction contracts.

That is why the strikes won the backing of the extreme right wing of the Conservative Party-responsible for the real "union-bashing" of the 1980s under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher—and the enthusiastic support of the fascist British National Party.

Tabling a commons motion in support of the protests, Conservative MP Bill Cash demanded, "We need British jobs and British laws for British workers," and boasted that his bill had the support of "former secretaries of state and members of the Cabinet" under the previous Tory administrations, including Peter Lilley and John Redwood.

More significant have been arguments extended by so-called Labour "lefts" such as Jon Cruddas and John McDonnell and by their supporters in groups such as the Stalinist *Morning Star* and the Socialist Party in justifying the dispute.

In an oblique reference to the "Britons first" axis of the protest, McDonnell said it was not necessary to "blindly accept either the analysis or demands of those directly engaged in the dispute". But, he insisted, the protest "has been about the right to work. As this latest crisis of capitalism unfolds many more workers will be demanding the right to work, and we must support them".

Long-time Stalinist and *Guardian* columnist Seamus Milne attacked those who had criticised the dispute, arguing that it "is not about race or immigration, it's about class.

"This is a battle for jobs in a deepening recession and a backlash against the deregulated, race-to-the-bottom neoliberal model backed by New Labour for a decade and now so clearly falling apart".

There is no question that the "battle for jobs" is an intense concern for millions of working people. Tens of thousands of jobs are being destroyed in every sector—construction, retail, manufacturing and the public service. There are few examples in any of these industries, however, where the unions have made any protest, let alone organised a struggle.

There are two ways in which the defence of jobs can be organised. The first, real "class" based approach, advanced by genuine socialists, proceeds from the recognition that workers are exploited by dint of their relationship to the ownership and control of the means of production, which is monopolised by a wealthy few and organised on the basis of profit.

The fight for decent jobs, conditions and living standards must therefore proceed in the struggle to abolish these

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conditions of exploitation, to establish genuine democratic control over the economy and to reorganise it in the interests of the whole of society.

Faced with attacks by globally operating corporations, this struggle is of necessity international in scope, uniting all workers in defence of their common interests. In the struggle against the big business policies of the EU, the fight against British capital is of fundamental importance, especially given its leading role in the attacks on working conditions and living standards at "home" and overseas.

The conditions on UK construction sites are a particular example of these attacks. The system of sub-contracted or "lump" labour—whereby workers are largely self-employed on temporary contracts—was challenged by strikes and militant opposition in the 1970s, for which Des Warren and Ricky Tomlinson were sentenced to several years in prison, without Labour or the TUC lifting a finger in their defence.

It was only after this that sub-contracting became ubiquitous. As a consequence, the same workers that the unions at Lindsey claim have now won a "victory" can expect to be employed on just nine-week contracts, after which they will once again be thrown into a "battle for jobs". Taking the construction industry under the control of the working class as part of a broader socialist restructuring of the economy is the only means of preventing this fratricidal cycle.

Then there is the other way to fight for "the right to work", the "backlash against neo-liberalism" of the nationalist and corporatist variety that makes common cause with British bosses and the British state.

This position accepts the exploitation of the working class and its subordination to capital as an immutable fact. In the manner of the little boy with his finger in the leaking dyke, it claims that it is possible to deal with the world recession without tackling its underlying causes in the profit system.

This is the strategy employed by the union bureaucracy and its "left" apologists that has been put into effect in the recent dispute.

The Socialist Party resorts to all manner of sophistry to try and disguise this—even dragging in Karl Marx. They write that Marx "wrote about the attempts by the British capitalists, at the time of a London hatters' strike in the 1850s, to bring in Belgian hatters to break the strike. The workers' international, of which Marx was the leader at the time, put out an appeal to the Belgian workers, and they responded by refusing to do the London hatters' work".

There is one small problem with this analogy; the Italian workers weren't brought into break a strike. The strike was called over their employment.

Having denounced the Italian contractor IREM as an essentially scab outfit, its agreement to take on British workers is now being hailed as a great step forward for workers rights! All the claims of the unions, that the Italian and Portuguese workers were non-union, cheap labour and living in atrocious conditions on barges, have been dropped. Presumably these conditions—if they truly existed—still stand.

What then constitutes the victory? Writing under the headline "workers show their strength", the SP's Alistair Tice states how the latest offer "means half the jobs will be filled by UK workers, parity with IREM's own workforce".

The Stalinists are more explicit. The *Morning Star* highlights the "absurdities" of the fact that British workers are "grafting hundreds, even thousands, of miles from home", while "Italian and Portuguese workers are doing exactly the same thing in Lincolnshire". Milne similarly denounces as "absurd" that European workers are travelling "hundreds of miles from home" for jobs, "while others are thrown out of work".

This is just another way of demanding an end to freedom of movement for all workers, a bar on "non-locals" from employment and, ultimately, support for economic protectionism whose ultimate consequence will be a catastrophic destruction of the productive forces, including the lives of millions of workers through war.

What is there to differentiate the arguments of the so-called "left" from those of the BNP, which attacks the recent deal at Lindsey as a betrayal because the foreign workers weren't all sacked to make way for "Brits"?

The SP can prattle on as much as it likes about the fact that "no workers' movement is ‘chemically pure'". The bottom line is that it, along with the Communist Party, have played a central role in providing legitimacy to the demand for "British jobs for British workers", and they must be held politically accountable for its repercussions.

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