

Stalinists and Socialist Party defend “Britons first” refinery protest

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As strike action by refinery workers over the use of foreign labour continued Monday, the Stalinist Communist Party and the Socialist Party sought to defend the demand for "British jobs for British workers".

The dispute centres on the employment of Italian and Portuguese workers by IREM, an Italian sub-contractor that made a successful bid to construct a desulphurisation unit at the Total oil company's refinery in Lincolnshire.

With unions claiming that IREM are discriminating against "local" labour, contractors at other facilities nationally joined the protest.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown has insisted that strike action is "not defensible" and demanded that the protestors get back to work. At the same time, he defended his 2007 pledge to ensure "British jobs for British workers", claiming he had meant only that UK workers would receive adequate training to be able to compete in the globalised economy.

In truth, Brown's call was a deliberate attempt to utilise right-wing populist demagoguery to divert from his government's role in growing social inequality.

Brown unveiled his "Britons first" policy at the annual conference of the Trades Union Congress in September 2007.

Union claims that Brown's successful election as Labour leader would ensure more "socially inclusive" policies than under Tony Blair had been undermined by the government's imposition of below-inflation public sector pay awards and his attack on London Underground workers for striking over job losses and pension rights.

Brown faced no challenge from the TUC. Instead his speech—which mirrored far-right claims that foreign workers were "stealing" jobs and pledged to tighten up regulations on non-European Union workers and to "fast-track" unemployed British workers into "available" jobs—was greeted warmly.

Since then, Labour's championing of the "free market" as the pinnacle of civilisation has unravelled. The global credit crunch has exposed an economic system based on financial

parasitism and outright criminality, threatening millions with unemployment, the loss of their homes, and wiping out savings and pensions.

In the UK alone in the last three months, more than 300,000 jobs have been lost. Some 1,200 jobs have been shed at Nissan, Sunderland. Honda has shut its Swindon plant for four months, affecting 4,200 workers, and Corus has laid off 2,500 steelworkers.

No one should be fooled by the statements of various union officials and their apologists in the Communist Party of Britain, the Socialist Party and others—that the oil refinery dispute represents a fight back against the economic crisis.

In every instance, the unions have worked with management and the government to ensure orderly lay-offs, pay cuts and other measures at workers' expense. At Corus in Scunthorpe for example—not far from the Lindsey oil refinery—the unions agreed to workers being stood down on half pay. And union leaders at Jaguar Land Rover, which employs 15,000 people in the UK, are in talks with management over a "menu" of pay cuts.

The union's adoption of Brown's "Britons first" policy is a continuation of this corporatist agenda in an even more reactionary form.

The protests at Lindsey oil refinery are unofficial—but there is no question that the union bureaucracy has engineered the form and character of this dispute from day one.

A statement posted on the Socialist Party's website by GMB member Keith Gibson, who is on the strike committee at the Lindsey refinery, underscores this.

He states that in mid-November, workers employed by the contractor Shaw's at Lindsey, were told they would be laid off in February. Gibson makes no reference to threats of protests and strikes at this point. It is not until December when IREM won another contract that the union was stirred into action.

IREM's success coincided with the decision of French firm Alstom to sub-contract construction work on a new gas-fired plant near Kent to a Polish firm Remak, who were to bring in Spanish and Polish workers.

Gibson describes how a National Shop Stewards Forum agreed to take action against Alstom, which then spread to Lindsey.

Decrying "company bosses who refuse to recruit skilled British labour in the UK," Gibson concludes, "THE B.N.P SHOULD TAKE HEED; U.K. CONSTRUCTION WORKERS WILL NOT TOLERATE 'ANOTHER RACIST ATTEMPT' TO SEVER FRATERNAL RELATIONS WITH OTHER WORKERS FROM OTHER NATIONS."

The ludicrous claim that the demand for "Britons first" is compatible with "fraternal relations" with foreign workers echoed by the Stalinist *Morning Star*.

Normally when the far-right *Daily Mail* and the fascist British National Party opt to support a strike, "alarm bells should start ringing on the left", the *Star* wrote, even if their arguments are "alluring".

No cause for alarm in this instance, it continues, as the real "villains" targeted in the refinery dispute are "the bosses across Europe" who want to "set worker against worker in a grim race to the bottom in pay and conditions."

Jerry Hicks was a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party—until he resigned in 2007 to join George Galloway's faction in the split in the Respect-Unity Coalition. He is the "left" candidate in forthcoming elections for the post of General Secretary of the Amicus section of Unite.

In a statement on the protests, he remarked blithely that Brown's demand for "'British jobs for British workers', has created a huge problem all of his own making." Brown can "no longer simply sit on his hands waiting on the sidelines", Hicks continues, calling on the union to "organise a national campaign for industrial action."

The use of a cheap labour workforce is a time-honoured method of employers to undermine wages and conditions, and is a legitimate matter for opposition. But there is no evidence that this is the issue involved in the current dispute.

Gibson's own account suggests that the pay and conditions of the Italian workers are no different to nationally-agreed rates. An article in the *Mail on Sunday* reported that Bernard McAuley, regional officer of the Unite trade union at the centre of the protests, was involved in three meetings in the last month with IREM directors where agreement over the terms and conditions of the 140-strong Italian workforce, including wages and tea breaks, was struck.

The unions claim they are unable to verify the specific terms on which the Italian and Portuguese workers are employed. Even leaving to one side the *Mail's* account of McAuley's meetings with IREM, this is not believable and speaks volumes as to the union's real motivations.

The TUC is a vast apparatus, with numerous flunkies paid for at members' expense. As part of the European Trade Union Confederation, it should be relatively easy to establish the terms of employment for the IREM workers—either by asking the Italian trade unions or, if they were actually concerned with the fate of IREM's workforce, sending a delegation to discuss with them directly. Despite shedding crocodile tears over the fact that IREM's workforce is being accommodated on huge ex-prison ships, no approach has been made to the Italian workers to even determine their living conditions.

In all the statements released by the unions, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party and Hicks, there is no mention of building unity with the IREM workers. It is not solidarity with foreign workers that the unions are seeking, but with the employers and government. The strikes do not challenge the rights of bosses to exploit workers, but demand rather that they exploit their own local or national workforce.

A Unite Amicus press statement reads, "The government has invested billions of pounds into the economy to support jobs during this recession. This strategy depends on employers playing their part."

Making clear that non-British labour *is* the union's target, another release states explicitly, "It makes no economic sense to bring in [non-local] workers... But if we cannot make the contractors see sense, then it is up to Government to do so."

The *Mail* reported that Unite/Amicus leader Derek Simpson had warned Brown three weeks ago "that there would be industrial unrest if the influx of foreign workers did not stop."

The stance of the unions and the pseudo-left groups to the oil refinery protests must serve as a warning. Faced with a major economic crisis that threatens the survival of the capitalist profit system itself, their response is to adopt the noxious policy of economic nationalism and anti-migrant propaganda, while embracing the government and the employers as the allies of "British workers".



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