

# Socialist Party offers yet another apologia for “Britons first” refinery dispute

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Unofficial strike action by hundreds of contractors at oil refineries, power stations and nuclear plants in the UK continued Tuesday, the seventh day of the strike.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is opposed to the strike, which can have only a reactionary impact and outcome. The trade union bureaucracy at the national, regional and local level has waged the dispute based on the nationalist slogan, “British jobs for British workers,” and it centres on a protest against the awarding of a contract to the Italian company IREM that employs its own workforce.

So far, the refineries and plants involved continue to work normally. But with the dispute threatening to escalate, the union bureaucracy is coming under increasing pressure from the government to bring it to an end. The GMB has urged a return to work and Unite leader Derek Simpson has proposed a three-point plan to end the dispute. The plan focuses on measures it claims will give UK labour “fair access” to contract jobs, including “Corporate Social Responsibility agreements” and the overturning of a European Court of Justice precedent, which “gives employers a license for ‘social dumping’ and prevents unions from taking action to prevent the erosion of UK workers’ pay and condition”.

This is a reference to the 2004 Laval dispute in Sweden, when the court rejected the demand of the Swedish construction union to abide with an existing collective agreement within the building sector and accepted that a Latvian contractor could offer Latvian pay rates. The unions state that they are also opposed to the European Union’s Postal Workers Directive, relating to whether agreements reached by trade unions under collective bargaining agreements should be applied to foreign workers.

But challenging the Laval ruling in no way legitimises a campaign for “British jobs”. It would mean rather a demand for jobs for all on agreed rates.

Under successive Conservative and Labour administrations, economic policy has been shaped by moves to free capital and investment from any legal fetters and to lower taxes, so that British banks and corporations can themselves invest worldwide, in the hope that Britain will be an attractive location for inward investment. The lowering of wage rates, in order to encourage European-wide competition, is central to this.

But the strike’s central demand is a recipe for an accelerating descent into trade war, the growth of xenophobia, racism and right-wing reaction. The protectionist measures demanded by the trade unions line workers up behind British corporations in a bitter struggle for markets that are being battered by the worsening economic crisis. They sow divisions between British and European workers, when a united offensive against globally operating corporations is the only way that the working class can possibly defend its interests.

The implications of this type of nationalism for the working class are epitomised by the focus of the right-wing *Daily Mail* on the claim that “Nearly a third of workers at the Olympic site in London are foreigners,” flying in the face of Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s “promise of ‘British jobs for British workers’.”

The *Mail* claims that official figures “show that just 63 percent of the 3,315 workers on the Olympic Park are British and eight per cent are Irish. The remaining 29 percent are foreign workers, half of whom hail from non-EU countries.”

Along this road, there is no end in sight. The Irish are being divided from the British in a way that must outrage anyone familiar with British history. Moreover, as the UCATT construction union general secretary Alan Ritchie has pointed out, of the 29 percent identified as “foreign” labour—“which is fewer than 350 workers”—“most have lived in the area for over 20 years, but hold foreign passports.”

## The role of the Socialist Party

To lend support to the Lindsey strike, by portraying it as a progressive struggle by the rank and file in defence of jobs, is thus a betrayal of the working class. And that is the role being played by the Socialist Party.

Leading Socialist Party personnel are in the leadership of the dispute. These include Keith Gibson, a party member on the six-man Lindsey strike committee. John McEwan, a “supporter and victimised worker from the refinery”, and leading SP member Alistair Tice are also involved.

Tice reported on the Socialist Party’s web site February 2 that “The strike committee accepted the main demands of Keith Gibson and John McEwan to put to the mass meeting today” and cites their adoption, as proof that criticisms of the strike are unfounded.

Even if the demands adopted by the strike committee were of a genuinely socialist and internationalist character, this would not provide the dispute with a clean bill of health—under conditions where hundreds of placards are being waved demanding “British jobs for British workers”—and when there have been numerous reports of hostility directed against IREM’s Italian and Portuguese workforce.

The leaflet distributed by the Socialist Party states, “Rather than saying British jobs for British workers, we should say trade union jobs & conditions for all workers”.

But this apparent gesture to international solidarity is just window dressing. The Socialist Party is fully aware that this is not the basis on which the dispute is being waged.

Moreover, the central demand of the Socialist Party is for “Union controlled registering of unemployed and locally skilled union members, with nominating rights as work becomes available”.

This is only a prettified version of “British jobs for British workers”, rendered as a call for the preferential employment of *local* union members. Who defines what is “local”? Having barred European workers—are the Scots, Welsh and Irish to be prevented from working in England; those from the north of England stopped from working in the south and vice versa?

The demand is also designed to reinforce the

domination of the trade union bureaucracy over the workforce, by allowing the very organisations that have betrayed countless struggles by workers to determine who will get a job. The same holds true of the SP’s call to build “links with construction trade unions on the continent.”

For the Socialist Party, everything must go through the rotten and moribund trade union apparatus. They are opposed to any initiative that would threaten the stranglehold of the bureaucracy over the working class.

In an interview given by to the politics.co.uk web site, a Socialist Party spokesman declared, “This isn’t a racist strike. This is a basic strike for trade union rights”.

He goes on to describe “The ‘British jobs’ slogan” as “just one in the eye for Gordon Brown” and again cites the endorsing of the SP’s demands as proof that all is well.

When asked “if the rhetoric of the strike action opened the door to accusations of racism,” the Socialist Party replies that “It’s always dangerous. If you wait for a technically pure class struggle you’ll be waiting forever”.

The issue is not to await a “technically pure class struggle”, but to alert workers to the fact that they are being manipulated by a pro-capitalist union leadership into waging a campaign against workers from overseas.

The Lindsey dispute cannot be simply “steered” in a progressive direction with a few well-chosen slogans substituting “local” for “British”. All this will achieve is to provide a smokescreen for the divisive politics currently being peddled at Britain’s refineries.

A genuine defence of jobs can only be waged in a struggle against the union bureaucracy and its nationalist agenda—through the formation of independent rank-and-file organisations that must actually defend *all* jobs—by establishing the closest possible unity with foreign workers, both in Britain and throughout Europe.



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