

Britain: Nationwide strike continues in defence of sacked refinery workers

Robert Stevens
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Sacked contract workers employed at the Lindsey Oil Refinery (LOR) in Lincolnshire, England, continued their strike action and protests this week. The 647 sacked workers are involved in the construction of a £200 million desulphurisation plant at the refinery, known as HDS-3.

The mass sackings were carried out by contracting firms at the site, under the auspices of refinery owner Total UK. The contractors were fired on June 19 without notice, in response to an unofficial strike that began on June 11 to demand the re-instatement of 51 colleagues made redundant by one of the nine contracting firms at the site, Shaw Group UK.

The strike quickly spread beyond LOR, and by June 19, at least 17 sites had been affected nationwide with several thousand workers involved. The strikes have continued to spread, with up to 4,000 workers supporting the strike by June 24.

Plants affected included Britain's largest power station, Drax in Selby, Yorkshire; E.ON's power plant at Ratcliffe-on-Soar Nottinghamshire; EDF Energy's plants at Cottam and West Burton; the south Hook terminal in Milford Haven in Pembrokeshire, west Wales; and two plants in Scotland. Around 900 contract workers at the Sellafield nuclear plant in Cumbria returned to work on June 23.

On June 23, around 2,000 workers, including those sacked at LOR, took part in a rally called by the GMB trade union. Also participating were workers from several other unions including Unite, the public sector trade union Unison and the Fire Brigades Union. Many of the workers held up placards and banners with slogans including, "Total injustice" and "Say no to the death of the construction industry."

A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team distributed

several hundred copies of a leaflet that appeared on the WSWWS on June 22.

Wary of the increasingly militant mood of workers in opposition to redundancies and job losses, the GMB is seeking to ensure that the strike remains under the control of the trade unions. GMB leader Paul Kenny said that, "As far as we are concerned, [the strikers] are victimised and locked-out people, and it is an official dispute from the moment those notices arrived."

"A solution we will have, a sell-out we won't," he added. "And if there is any suggestion from any quarter that the solution involves the people who were sacked not going back to work, or those who have been victimised elsewhere in the country not getting their jobs back, then what I say is they haven't got a solution."

Kenny said that the union is also finalising plans to for a national ballot of its building industry members over jobs and conditions.

Throughout the dispute, GMB and Unite had refused to challenge the anti-trade union legislation and had previously refused to recognise walkouts deemed to be sympathy strikes.

Kenny announced that the union was to participate in talks with the various contracting firms at the LOR over the next 24 hours in an attempt to resolve the dispute. Negotiations were subsequently held between the GMB and Unite and contracting firms including Jacobs and Shaw UK. Also attending was Total UK, who said that they would attend only as "observers," and the employers group, the National Construction Industry Association.

As the dispute has deepened, Total has sought to distance itself from the decision to sack the original 51 workers, as well as the subsequent 647. Total's president of refining and marketing, Michel Bénézit,

said, “The discussion has to take place between the unions and the sub-contractors. It is not our duty...[and] we are not responsible.”

The increasing delays on the HDS-3 construction project, already six months behind schedule, have cost Total an additional €100 million. It was scheduled to be up and running by summer 2009. The Lindsey Oil Refinery is the third largest in the UK and processes 10 million tonnes of crude per year (200,000 barrels per day).

The GMB is now posing as a defender of jobs and conditions at Lindsey, but it has a long record of carrying out the attacks required by corporations such as Total. In October, in the aftermath of the government bailout of the banking system in Britain and the onset of a major recession, the GMB agreed a concessions contract with the construction equipment manufacturer JCB. This resulted in the loss of 170 job losses and a pay cut of £50 per week for workers at seven plants in England and Wales. The ballot the GMB presented only offered two options: either vote to remain at 39 hours and see 500 redundancies or vote for short-time working and accept 170 redundancies.

The importance of the deal the GMB imposed at JCB was noted by the *Daily Telegraph*, which wrote in an October 30 editorial that the agreement “could be the forerunner of similar arrangements in other companies faced with rapidly declining order books.”

Reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to some of those who participated in the June 23 rally at Lindsey Oil Refinery.

Alan from Peterborough said, “This strike shows how unfair it is in Britain. I don’t think this would ever happen in France or Germany. The laws are all designed against workers. I think this could be a long dispute.

“What we need now is for every worker to support this strike. It’s good that the unions have now said they will back us. What is needed is for all the other unions to do the same. If it is a long strike, then most of us are prepared for it. It will cost us some money, but then you have to make sacrifices for your principles.

Mark from Liverpool said, “This all started when they offered the 102 jobs at the end of the last dispute in February. It seems they didn’t all materialise. There were only about three quarters given out, I think. They sacked the 51 at Shaw’s this month, and I heard there

were another 40 starting at another contractor. So we thought, why don’t they start the 51 who had been made redundant? But they didn’t. Shaw’s and Jacobs are in charge of it here, and they are responsible for the sackings.

“The Italians have been here now for six months and we have got nothing against them. We just wanted them lads made redundant at Shaw’s transferring over.”

Trevor is a pipe coverer and one of the sacked Lindsey contract workers. He said, “One of the main problems today is that there are no employment opportunities. Because of the slump in the construction industry, there is no space to do jobs overseas anymore.

“Previously, in the trade years, everyone used to get the same money. Now, in 2009, the rate is suddenly too high to pay and they would sooner smash us out of the equation and employ other workers from Europe on a lower rate. That is very threatening. They are trying to smash wages, and that can’t be right”.

The WSWs team explained that the only progressive solution to problems facing contract workers in Europe was their unification on a socialist programme. Trevor said, “I don’t mind European workers being here as long as they are on the same pay and conditions as us. I can see the sense in some of what you are saying.”



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