

Britain: Lindsey oil refinery workers win reinstatement

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Striking subcontracting workers employed at the Lindsey oil refinery in Lincolnshire, Humberside, voted to return to work on June 29, after an agreement was reached between the managing contractor Jacobs and the GMB and Unite trade unions.

Up to 1,200 workers are employed on the construction of a £200 million desulphurisation plant at LOR, which is owned by Total.

The full details of the agreement are not known, but the terms include the reinstatement of the 51 workers originally made redundant by Shaws UK contractors, as well as the 647 workers who were dismissed for taking solidarity strike action.

The reinstated contractors have been guaranteed a minimum of four weeks' work at the site. Also included in the agreement is a formal redundancy programme, which will be implemented as the building project concludes on various areas of the site. According to the *Independent* on June 26, this "guarantees both efforts to co-ordinate new work and normal severance payments in the event of redundancy." The unions have also said that no worker who participated in the sympathy action nationwide in support of their sacked colleagues will be victimised.

The latest wildcat industrial action at Lindsey began on June 11, following the laying off of the 51 workers by Shaws. The workers were made redundant at the same time as another contractor, R Blackett and Charlton, was taking on an additional 61 workers doing the same type of work. Refusing to redeploy the 51 was a clear case of victimisation. According to the GMB, one of the senior managers at the Total site had said that the 51 workers would not be transferred to the new jobs, as they were "an unruly workforce who had taken part in unofficial disputes and who won't work weekends." This was a reference to the unofficial strike action that had occurred at the plant in January and February.

Within days, more than 1,200 workers were participating in the unofficial strike at Lindsey. On June 19, with the backing of Total, contracting firms at Lindsey announced the sacking of 647 workers.

The strike rapidly escalated nationwide, as 4,000 contractors at up to 30 refineries and power station sites, including Polish

contractors at the Drax power station in North Yorkshire, walked out in sympathy. The action even spread beyond refinery and power plant sites into the nuclear power plant at Sellafield.

The fact that the sacked workers at Lindsey have been reinstated, albeit for a temporary period, is fundamentally due to the courageous stand taken by the contractors at the site and nationwide in defying the anti-union legislation. This class solidarity was critical in opposing the attack by Total and its subcontractors. Last week, Total admitted that delays it has suffered, partly as a result of strikes, have already cost £85 million and the project has overrun by six months.

The Lindsey dispute and the trade unions

The victory at Lindsey has been the occasion for Britain's left groups to claim that the strikes represent the rebirth of the trade unions as fighting organisations. The Socialist Party (SP), which has three members on the Lindsey strike committee, glossed over the role of the union bureaucracy and insisted that their official support for the dispute was a massive shot in the arm for the sacked workers, directly leading to their reinstatement. Alistair Tice of the SP wrote, "Yes the trade union officials want to regain control, but the 'official' support was a huge confidence boost to the strikers...."

For its part, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) declared that the essential lesson contained in the Lindsey "victory" was that every worker should now join a trade union. Referring to the upcoming national ballot in the building industry, the SWP stated, "An important step in the fightback is to win the construction national ballot for action in the GMB and Unite unions. Everyone should join a union and get involved in the ballot."

In promoting the Lindsey strike as a watershed victory for the working class, the SWP comments, "What a day of contrasts! Lindsey workers win through unofficial, 'illegal' action, but at British Airways hundreds of workers are bullied into working free for up to a month because the unions did not fight."

In reality, the unions did not fight at Lindsey either. If workers had not taken immediate wildcat action, and had the dispute been left in the hands of the union bureaucracy, then the sackings would have gone ahead unopposed. Faithfully abiding by the anti-union laws, the union would possibly have given Total seven days' notice of its intention to hold a strike ballot. On the basis of a successful strike ballot, the union would have then insisted that industrial action could proceed at any point up to four weeks later. Time and time again, the unions have utilised these laws, in collusions with management, to demobilise opposition and to allow massive attacks on the jobs, pay and conditions of their members.

On the majority of occasions, the bureaucracy ensures that disputes don't even reach the stage of a ballot. Instead they loyally implement or support whatever companies demand, including the recent "work for free" initiative at British Airways and a pay cut by BA pilots.

At Lindsey it was the escalation of the unofficial strike action nationwide, in defiance of the anti-union laws against secondary action, that forced Total to retreat. And it was only because the dispute was escalating out of its control that the union bureaucracy finally offered its official "support" to the dispute in order to bring it to an end.

The "victory" obtained at Lindsey was one that was effectively imposed on the union. It was entirely due to building workers acting *outside* of the parameters of the trade union apparatus. Indeed, it is difficult to see what the workers would have done differently if the trade unions had not existed at all.

Unite and the GMB were officially opposed to the unofficial action and refused to sanction it. In its statement announcing the sacking of the 657, Total even declared, "The contractor workforce has been engaged in an unofficial, illegal walkout since last Thursday June 11th. This action has been repudiated by both the Unite and GMB unions."

It was only on June 23 that the GMB stated that it would officially support the strike due to its concern over the rapid escalation of wildcat action throughout Britain. Even then, GMB leader Paul Kenny pointed out that the unions could support the strike because their members had been sacked, enabling the union to avoid any challenge to the anti-union laws.

Until this point, the unions did not provide any financial support to their striking members. It was also only on June 23, fully aware that talks with the contracting firms were imminent and that Total was seeking a quick settlement, that the GMB announced it was setting up a "hardship fund."

If anything, Unite's stance was more openly craven than that of the GMB and hostility towards its leadership amongst the strikers was more pronounced. During a mass meeting on June 23, local GMB shop steward Phil Whitehurst even felt obliged to instruct the workers present not to heckle national officials, particularly Tom Hardacre of Unite. "Now I appeal to you to

listen to these people. We don't want no heckling," he said. "We've got Unite banners flying. We've got GMB banners flying. Let's keep it that way."

Far from being at the forefront of a "fight-back," in October the GMB agreed a deal with the construction equipment manufacturer JCB that included 170 job losses and a pay cut of £50 week. In March, Toyota and Unite announced an agreement cutting pay and working hours at UK plants by 10 percent. Other auto firms imposing cuts with trade union collaboration include Ford, Nissan, GM Vauxhall, Mini and Honda. At Honda's plant in Swindon, no cars were produced for four months, with its employees being paid in full under a "time-banking" agreement for two months, then half-pay for the next two. Workers also had a 3 percent pay cut imposed that was implemented on their return to work in June.

Speaking about the importance of the deal to Honda, BBC's employment correspondent Martin Shankleman said, "While a number of struggling companies are imposing pay freezes on their workers, to get employees to accept a pay cut is a significant achievement. It is a measure of the calibre of industrial relations at the plant."

The role of the unions in imposing the attacks required by big business has been recognised by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). According to its survey of 300 companies, more than half—55 percent—are planning pay freezes in the next 12 months, and another 4 percent intend to make pay cuts. Three in 10 firms have imposed a recruitment freeze across their entire organisation, while another 31 percent have a partial freeze in place.

Commenting on what it called a "revolution in industrial relations," the *Guardian* cited the Trades Union Congress's head of economics, Adam Lent, speaking about the raft of union-company deals to cut jobs, hours or pay.

"That's always been there," Lent said. "We had short-time working in the 1970s, and in the 1980s. Unions will be pragmatic, and employers will be pragmatic, just as they always are when times are challenging."



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