

Britain: Total Oil sacks 647 striking workers at Lindsey Oil Refinery

Robert Stevens
22 June 2009

On June 19, 647 construction contractors were sacked at the Lindsey Oil Refinery construction site (LOR), in Lincolnshire, England. Some 1,200 workers at the site are involved in the construction of a £200 million desulphurisation plant.

The sackings were carried out by Total Oil, without any notice, in response to an unofficial strike to demand the reinstatement of 51 colleagues made redundant by one of the many contracting firms at the site, Shaw Group UK. The sackings demonstrate the determination of the entire ruling elite to crush any and all manifestations of opposition to its agenda of job and wage cuts.

Total denounced what it called an “unofficial, illegal walk-out” that it stressed had been “repudiated” by the Unite and GMB trade unions. It refused to engage in any negotiations with the unions aimed at resolving the dispute. Unite and the GMB have once again refused to challenge anti-trade union legislation and have refused to recognise walkouts deemed to be sympathy strikes.

The mass firing of hundreds of contractors marks a major escalation in the offensive being waged against the working class. The sackings follow recent threats of union-busting and subsequent attempts to break the strike of London Underground workers. It occurs against the backdrop of the refusal of the government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown to back down over its plans to privatise the state postal service, the Royal Mail. Last week postal workers in London and Scotland took industrial action in opposition to the government’s plans.

The dismissal of hundreds of workers without warning or any form of negotiation must serve as a warning to all working people. It reveals the real state of social relations in Britain.

On June 11, Shaw’s workforce walked out in wildcat action to demand the re-instatement of their 51 colleagues. Workers employed by other contractors on the site came out in support. Within days some 1,200 workers were participating in the unofficial strike at the Lindsey refinery.

On June 17, a mass meeting of workers voted to stay out on strike until the 51 redundancies were rescinded.

Wildcat strikes rapidly spread throughout Britain. By June 19, at least 17 sites had been affected nationwide, with unofficial action involving some 2,500 workers taking place at oil refineries sites, including Ellesmere Port and Fiddlers Ferry in Cheshire, Ferrybridge, Drax and Eggborough in Yorkshire, Ratcliffe and Staythorpe in Nottinghamshire, Didcot in Oxfordshire, the Ensus site in Teesside and Aberthaw in South Wales. By the end of the week unofficial action had also spread to the nuclear power industry, as contract workers at EDF’s Energy Hinkley Point reactor in Somerset walked off the job.

The strikes at Lindsey pose before the refinery workers and the whole working class the necessity of fundamental political reorientation. The workers involved have previously mounted a series of wildcat strikes and protests beginning in January of this year. Some of the 51 made redundant had been on the strike committee in the previous wildcats.

These earlier disputes, though “unofficial,” were led politically by Unite and the GMB and were conducted on the basis of a divisive nationalist programme to oppose the employment of Italian and Portuguese workers who worked for an Italian contracting firm, IREM. The dominant slogan was the call for “British Jobs for British Workers.”

In opposing the employment of foreign workers, the unions claimed that there was a shared interest between British workers and British-based companies in opposing unfair competition and preserving a skilled workforce. This has only served to disarm refinery workers in the struggle against major international corporations such as Total, and the various contractors who compete for building contracts that have no interest in the nationality of the workers they employ and use such division to drive down everyone’s wages and working conditions.

The road to the present situation was opened up by the refusal of the trade unions to oppose casualisation of the industry and the growth of contracting in the first place.

There were mass strikes and protests in the 1970s against the growth of casualised labour in construction that were betrayed by the unions.

During the 1980s, due to the then still fairly restricted and largely national nature of the labour market in the construction industry, the contracting system—although workers had no long-term contract—still appeared to a section of workers to be beneficial. Periods without employment were relatively few due to the boom in construction, and skilled contractors were in the main well-paid relative to the general population.

But this was only a temporary phenomenon. Today, under conditions of globally integrated production and a global labour market, along with a deepening slump in the construction industry, the contracting system is being used to drive down wages and conditions at an unprecedented rate, and previous “blue book” regulations are being torn up.

Employers are utilising growing unemployment in order to further this onslaught. According to recent statistics, about 25-30 percent of the 30,000 workers involved in refinery-related building projects are currently unemployed. The latest UK unemployment figures revealed that in April, 395 metal workers, 150 bricklayers, 127 plasterers and 96 carpenters applied for every vacancy in their respective fields that were advertised in Job Centres.

Under these conditions the trade unions seek to pit worker against worker in a fratricidal struggle for ever fewer jobs and declining wages.

The Socialist Equality Party puts forward an entirely opposed perspective—a united and joint offensive by refinery workers carried out in unity with their class brothers and sisters in Britain and with refinery contractors throughout the European continent.

The fight to defend jobs, working conditions and living standards is one that must, of necessity, be international in scope. Total, a French-based conglomerate, is one of the world’s major international oil and gas companies. It has operations in over 130 countries and employs a workforce of 95,000 worldwide.

Such an internationalist perspective is also required when it comes to supposedly “local” contracting firms, such as Shaw Group UK, which is a subsidiary of the US-based Shaw Group, Inc. The firm has operations in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Australasia, employing 26,000 workers internationally. Last year the group reported revenues of \$7 billion.

Workers must reject the nationalist conception that they have any shared interests with any of these sections of capital, whether they are based in Britain, Italy, Portugal, the US, or any other country. The overriding concern of Total, Shaw, and the rest is to secure profits by increasing the

exploitation of “their” workforce to maintain their international competitiveness and defend market share.

The striking refinery workers are not simply involved in an industrial dispute, but in a *political* struggle. It involves not only a fight against Total, but also against the government, the opposition parties and their representatives in the media.

The *Times* on June 20 commented that, by sacking the workforce, Total was issuing a warning to workers that it would not compromise in any shape or form.

“Total, bruised by the strikes earlier in the year, appears to have delivered a stark warning to workers who will vote on a formal strike ballot in a few months. Down tools, and you may not have a job to return to,” said the *Times*.

As the offensive against the London Underground workers, Post Office employees and others clearly demonstrates, the same agenda is being pursued by the capitalist class against the entire working class.

The prerequisite for a successful struggle by the refinery workers is the taking of the dispute out of the hands of the Unite and GMB trade union bureaucracy, based on a conscious opposition to their pro-business and nationalist agenda. This strategy requires an organisational break with the trade unions and the limited and narrow perspective of trade union militancy.

Needed is the adoption of a programme consciously opposed to that of the ruling elite. The working class must intervene with its own solution, based on a socialist programme and the perspective of internationalism. The SEP calls on all workers in Britain to support the strike of the refinery workers. We urge refinery workers to establish independent rank-and-file committees to co-ordinate action with workers throughout the building industry in Britain, Europe and internationally.

Those who want to fight for such a programme should contact the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact