

Electricians in the UK protest threatened wage cuts

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Protests are erupting across the UK against plans by major building contractors to cut electricians' wages by up to 35 percent.

The dispute arose after the breakdown last year of nearly four years of negotiations over a new national joint pay scheme. For 40 years the Unite trade union and its predecessors have agreed to pay schemes at the national level through the Joint Industry Board (JIB). Now employers have seized on the economic crisis to push down wages by ripping up existing agreements.

This includes the JIB agreement itself. Eight major contractors walked out of the JIB talks and decided to impose their own conditions. They include some of the biggest construction companies. Around 6,000 workers are affected by the changes in these eight companies, and have now been put on notice of redundancy if they do not accept new terms and conditions in December.

Five of the eight companies—Balfour Beatty, Crown House Technologies, Spie Matthew Hall, Shepherd Engineering Services, and NG Bailey—have now served Unite with legal notice of their intention to dismiss. Giving the 90-day notice required by law, they are offering to re-engage workers on worse contracts on December 7.

The employers themselves disagree about how to implement changes to agreements. The Electrical Contractors Association (ECA) continues to back the JIB, whilst making it clear that it wants changes to pay and conditions. ECA Chief Executive Steve Bratt invited the breakaway firms back to the JIB to “work with us to find a positive way forward”.

The Heating and Ventilating Contractors Association (HCVA) are backing the breakaway firms. Denouncing the JIB as unworkable, they propose instead a new agreement which would break down the distinction

between electrical and mechanical workers' pay and conditions, which stands as an obstacle to their profits. As their draft document puts it, “the separate collective agreements ... do not facilitate the level of workforce integration now required”.

Their proposed Building Engineering Services National Agreement (BESNA) would tear up the five existing pay schemes and introduce one pay grade system. Pay would be cut from the current hourly rate of £16.25 to £14 for finishing, £12 for wiring, and £10.50 for metalworking.

Against this, hundreds of construction workers have blocked and occupied sites in a movement that has gathered momentum. They have staged protests and meetings at the Thameslink rail network site in Farringdon, the Shard at London Bridge, the new Tyne Tunnel in Newcastle, the Manchester Town Hall construction site, the Olympic site in Stratford, Grangemouth power station, and the Immingham and Lindsey Oil Refineries.

The protests have been coordinated by building workers in a rank and file campaign committee, reportedly elected out of a meeting of 500 construction workers in London last month.

The union has responded furiously to this development. A leaked email from Bernard McAulay, Unite's National Officer for Construction, condemned “this small fringe group” as “cancerous ... opportunists and extremely divisive”.

As the protests have spread, Unite has had to be seen to be present. Assistant General Secretary Gail Cartmail last week told demonstrators that the union was “committed to balloting as soon as possible”. Backing the trade union bureaucracy, the Stalinist *Morning Star* revealed what this meant: “Unite ... said it would ballot members for strike action *if the companies continued to*

attack national agreements” [emphasis added]. The companies had already issued dismissal notices by then. Earlier, the union had suggested a ballot date of December 9 for action; the new Balfour Beatty contracts would already be in effect by then.

While attacking workers’ conditions, the employers are keen to keep their relations with Unite. They regard it as central to imposing deals beneficial to the employers over the heads of the workers.

The BESNA draft sees “maximised” membership “of a recognised trade union” as vital to maintaining industrial relations. For her part, Cartmail has described the recruitment of members “to improve density” as being the union’s “absolute objective”.

The draft insists that “accredited and properly trained union representatives” can “act in accordance with the best interests of the company and the industry”. Accordingly, it insists that employers shall only recognise representatives of an agreed union. Even the breakaway contractors, who are pushing hardest for changes in conditions, are seeking the union’s assistance in implementing them.

This is a role Unite aims to fulfil. McAulay’s leaked email points to the union’s major concern being to gain control of and strangle this movement, rather than to address the attack on pay and conditions: “My colleagues will not throw away this wonderful opportunity the employers have given us to re engage with the workers in the industry as opposed to this poisonous campaign by these mindless individuals”. The “poisonous campaign” refers to meetings held by the rank and file campaign committee. The “wonderful opportunity” is the attempted slashing of electricians’ wages.

McAulay’s email is most concerned with criticisms of the Unite leadership. He denounces Jerry Hicks, who came second in the last election for General Secretary, for “addressing meetings attacking not only the Employers but more importantly our Union’s leadership and the capability of the Unite officers”.

The move to rank and file committees is an important step, but construction workers must ensure it is truly independent of the union.

Many of those who currently support the rank and file committee see it as a means of pressuring or changing Unite, and returning construction workers back to the union’s structures.

Jerry Hicks, a supporter of George Galloway’s Respect party, points to the likelihood that Unite’s developing support for the action presages “a takeover followed by a sellout”. Despite this, Hicks argues that “Unite needs to be put under pressure to negotiate a proper deal for us”.

The Socialist Party of England and Wales support the protests as “a useful vehicle to spread the word about the bosses’ plans”, but says the rank and file action should be brought “under the official banner of the union”. The Socialist Workers Party is reluctantly acknowledging the necessity of unofficial action whilst urging official action in line with the limited one-day protest strikes planned by some trade unions on November 30.

These positions serve only to maintain the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy over the working class. The fight against cuts in pay and conditions depends on the extension of rank and file committees across the construction industry and other sections of the working class, in a rebellion against the trade union bureaucracy.



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