

Electricians occupy London's Oxford Street

Paul Stuart
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On Wednesday of last week, confronting large numbers of police who were visibly more aggressive than in previous protests, 200 electricians and construction workers from building sites across London blocked the entrance to the Park House building site run by T Clarke plc.

T Clarke is one of eight construction firms that withdrew from the forty year old Joint Industries Board (JIB) and are seeking to impose new contracts cutting wages by up to 35 percent.

After police moved in to clear the road, throwing a number of protesters to the floor, workers marched toward the Bond Street site and blocked Oxford Street, causing major disruption, with a line of buses stretching as far as the eye could see. An electrician was cheered when he stated, "In New York they have occupied Wall Street. We have occupied Oxford Street."

A large number of police surrounded the protesters and pushed them back up to the Park House site, where Oxford Street was blocked again.

This followed a protest the previous Wednesday at the Kings Cross construction site, where 300 workers tried to occupy the work site but were blocked by police and security. They then blocked the main road between the mainline train stations Kings Cross and London St Pancras. As police began making targeted arrests, workers moved into Kings Cross station, taking over the concourse where a rally was held.

The Oxford Street blockade was part of a growing protest movement amongst electricians across Britain. Construction firms have given 6,000 electricians until 7 December to sign new contracts or face mass sackings. Workers in Liverpool protested the Shepherd Engineering site at the city library and later at the John Moore's University site. Electricians also mounted a protest outside Balfour Beatty Engineering Services' site at Cambuslang fire station in Scotland.

Workers in Scotland have also protested

Grangemouth oil refinery, Glasgow Vellodrome and Edinburgh City Council chambers. This follows smaller protests at the Tyne Tunnel, Manchester MediaCity UK, Balfours Carrington paper mill site in Manchester, Lindsey oil refinery, Conoco Philips Immingham, the blocking of the road into the Olympic site in East London, Wes Burton and the Westfield site in Stratford East London.

Unite trade union bureaucrats have made repeated efforts to head off the growing movement. Bernard McAulay, Unite's National Officer for Construction, denounced rank and file workers involved in the protests as a "small fringe group" of "cancerous ... opportunists."

Five of the construction firms, Crown House Technologies, Shepherd Engineering Services, Balfour Beatty, SPIE Matthew Hall and NG Bailey, have, according to Unite, "issued Unite with legal notice of their intention to dismiss, with notice, thousands of employees before re-engaging them on new inferior contracts."

In the face of an escalating struggle, threats from the employers and the approach of the 7 December deadline, Unite bureaucrats are making clear they will oppose any form of industrial action. During the Park House and Oxford Street blockade, Unite officials urged workers to move out of the road.

After a major protest at Lindsey Oil Refinery, one of the eight construction firms, MJN Colston, was described as having returned to the JIB fold. Unite described this as a great victory. However, Blane Judd, chief executive of the Heating and Ventilating Contractors' Association (leading the break-away employers) said this on behalf of the major contractors: "MJN Colston have made a statement to us that they have not turned their back on the BESNA [Building Engineering Services National Agreement] as is being promoted by the union, but will be moving at a slower

pace than the other seven for operational reasons.”

In other words, they are seeking to implement the same policies, but at the moment through the JIB and in collaboration with the trade unions. Unite officials have urged all other employers to follow suit. This was summed up by East Midlands regional organiser Steve Syson, interviewed after construction workers staged a protest outside a power station in Ratcliffe-on-Soar Nottingham, where subcontractor SPIE Matthew Hall is accused of threatening to sack its workforce if they do not sign new contracts.

“We want to get the contractor back around the table by getting clients and shareholders of the company to put pressure on them,” Syson said. “We tried to sit down with the employers to renegotiate the terms and we're open to talks with them, but unfortunately they're not taking place.”



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