

Unite move to bring UK electricians' dispute behind union

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Unite is seeking to take control of the rank-and-file electricians' movement and head off the developing militancy among construction workers.

Disputes are rising over attempts to draw up a new national pay agreement, the Building and Engineering Services National Agreement (BESNA), that would see wages cut by up to 35 percent. BESNA was promoted by eight of the major construction companies after four years of negotiations of new conditions under the existing Joint Industry Board (JIB) agreement.

A meeting in London on October 11 had originally been billed as a rank-and-file campaign committee meeting. In fact it was an official Unite event. The platform of national and regional officials included Assistant General Secretary Gail Cartmail and National Construction Officer Bernard McAulay. McAulay's most notable contribution to the dispute has been a leaked email denouncing the rank-and-file committee set up by those active in the dispute.

It was announced at the beginning of the meeting that only once the official part of the event was concluded, would the rest of the evening be devoted to an unofficial rank-and-file discussion! The bulk of the evening was given to promoting illusions in Unite's ability and willingness to fight against the threatened assault on wages and conditions contained within new draft pay agreements.

The "rank-and-file" part of the meeting, when it happened, amounted to 10 minutes given over to organisational and administrative questions. McAulay had spoken at a similar meeting in Hartlepool the night before, and the attendance of these bureaucrats was aimed at corralling workers ahead of a Unite executive meeting the following night.

From the chair Vince Passfield, Unite's London Construction Officer, began by calling on the meeting

to "reflect on the positives achieved through our unity". At the outset Passfield insisted that "politics needs to be put aside". There was an urgent need for the union to recruit so Unite could call a legally compliant strike ballot, he said.

In the meantime, the Unite officials talk of their efforts to organize a ballot while nothing happens. December 7, when Balfour Beatty electricians will be pushed onto new contracts, is looming, and the union refuses to be pressed on concrete details. There are now also reports that NG Bailey is looking to accelerate the implementation of new contracts by threatening workers with the sack if they do not sign by the end of November.

The union officials all spoke of MJN Colston having withdrawn from BESNA and returning to the JIB agreement. But this is by no means clear. The employers' organisation pushing for BESNA insist MJN Colston say they "have not turned their back on the BESNA as is being promoted by the union, but will be moving at a slower pace than the other seven for operational reasons."

Workers at the meeting angrily demanded to know when the strike ballot would be called. McAulay was carefully vague. "It is my intention in the next week to bring forward a ballot," he said. "I hope in the early part of next week to be in a position to make an announcement".

At the time of writing Unite has made no official statement. According to blogs sympathetic to the union, McAulay will make an announcement this coming Thursday of a ballot at selected Balfour Beatty sites. It is not yet known which sites will be balloted. It is rumoured that three to five sites will be named. The same sources suggest that Unite will ask workers to suspend their protests during the ballots.

At last week's meeting, when on the date of a ballot, Cartmail said firmly, "You have my word that we will ballot as soon as possible".

She has been using this line, as she herself acknowledged, for over three weeks now.

Steve Kelly, London construction branch secretary, read out the whole of the email in which McAulay denounced the rank-and-file committee as "this small fringe group" of "cancerous ... opportunists". But he then urged union recruitment by getting elected union officials (steward, safety reps and deputy stewards) onto building sites. "We need support from Unite", he stressed.

Cartmail and McAulay happily endorsed his comments. Cartmail agreed with a strategy of stopping jobs by militant action, but said this would be achieved by "getting organized," i.e., recruiting to Unite. She made no secret of the union's repudiation of such actions otherwise.

Many of the subcontracted workers, who have been at the forefront of the protests, reacted angrily to the argument about union recruitment. McAulay, attempting to undo the damage of his leaked email, said the activists were "working for the union". Workers shouted out, "We're all subbies [subcontracted workers]! We can't get a job!"

The ex-left all act as cheerleaders and apologists for the union bureaucracy. The Socialist Workers Party has called for unofficial action "if the union continues to drag its feet", but this is presented as a demand for Unite "to raise its game".

The Socialist Party points to unofficial action having forced the union to act, saying, "Construction workers will welcome this and Unite's involvement has raised confidence, but now these workers will want the union to act with a sense of urgency".

Counterfire argue that the protests have been "great for building morale", but "eventually" the dispute relies on Unite "deliver[ing] on its promise of a ballot".

McAulay and Cartmail said Unite was constrained by anti-union legislation and presented recruitment as the only way to achieve a legally compliant strike ballot. Both argued that the only possibility of overcoming the legislation rested on some future Labour government "committed to [its] repeal", in McAulay's words. After 13 years of a rightward-moving Labour government that showed no inclination to repeal this legislation,

challenged workers are entitled to demand why the union thinks Labour might take this turn in the future.

It was impossible to hide the levels of betrayal by the union over the years. Discussing the blacklisting of construction workers, Kelly complained bitterly "The union's done nothing, and we suspect collusion". This is an evasion. Kelly knows very well how the EETPU, the right-wing electricians' section of Unite's predecessor, colluded in a construction employers' blacklist. A blacklisted worker later told WSWS reporters that at his tribunal a Unite official had appeared on behalf of the company.

The rank-and-file movements, rather than being an adjunct to a supine trade union bureaucracy, must be developed in a political struggle against the unions' complicity. They must be developed as a conscious political and organisational alternative to the union.

The movement has already addressed the unity of all electricians: the rank-and-file committees must be extended to all sections of construction workers. Committees elected and controlled directly by the workforce need to unite these workers with all other sections of the working class in a common fight against the employers, the government and their accomplices, the trade union leaders.



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