

Unite's strike ballot for UK electricians only covers Balfour Beatty

Paul Bond
27 October 2011

Two months into a dispute that has seen rank-and-file protests across the country, the union Unite has announced a ballot of some of the electricians threatened by the proposed ripping up of existing employment agreements.

The ballot will take place within only one company, Balfour Beatty, which employs 1,690 of the 6,000 workers immediately affected. A source close to the union makes clear that even this action will be limited further. The “locations of strikes will be decided in due course”, he said, suggesting only site-specific actions.

Even now Unite has not made clear the timeframe of the ballot. The same source writes that the other companies involved “will be balloted in the next phase of Unite’s fight to defend its members”.

The belated and partial character of the proposed action highlights again the union’s efforts to prevent any serious struggle against the attacks of the employers. Workers have for the last forty years had wages and conditions set by the Joint Industry Board (JIB) agreement, signed by employers with the predecessors of Unite. Over the last four years new negotiations on the JIB had stalled, as employers moved to rip up all existing agreements in the face of the mounting economic crisis.

Frustrated at the lack of progress in implementing terms to their advantage, eight of the 14 major contractors walked out of the JIB talks and proposed their own Building Engineering Services National Agreement (BESNA). BESNA would tear up existing pay schemes and introduce a one pay grade system. From a current hourly rate of £16.25, electricians would be graded on a rate of between £14 and £10.50 an hour. This follows a pay freeze over the last year, so the wage cut may be higher in real terms than the 35 percent on paper.

The proposals would also cut travel pay and overtime rates. Under BESNA, grading would be done locally by employers rather than by national agreements. BESNA would see a deskilling of construction trades, and give employers greater power to dismiss workers and casualise employment.

Some 6,000 workers are immediately threatened, but this would open the door to wage cuts and attacks on conditions across the industry. Workers were put on notice of redundancy if they did not accept the new terms and conditions. Five of the eight companies served Unite with legal notice of their intention to dismiss, with workers being given a deadline of December 7 for re-engagement on worse contracts.

Unite’s response was derisory. Membership has dropped, in large part because of the union’s betrayals over the years. Subcontracted workers, who form the majority of the threatened 6,000, are largely outside the union.

Faced with this, workers organised a rank-and-file campaign committee and launched a series of protests at sites across the country. Unite was angry and hostile, with National Officer for Construction, Bernard McAulay, denouncing “this small fringe group” as “cancerous ... opportunists” in a leaked email.

The protests expressed the anger of the threatened workers, but some of those in the leadership of the committee set their goal as pressurising Unite and encouraging workers back behind the union. The Socialist Party, ever loyal to the union bureaucracy, wrote last week of electricians who had “left the union ... scornful of the lack of a fight”, before claiming that if Unite advanced “a clear fighting strategy” there would be “a flood of members back into the union”.

This goes to the heart of the question. Unite is now claiming that the wholesale attack on wages and

conditions is, in McAulay's words, a "wonderful opportunity the employers have given us to re-engage with the workers in the industry". Having taken a measure of the ex-lefts operating within the rank-and-file committee and found them loyal to the last, they have taken the opportunity provided to appear to back the electricians without lending any concrete support. Their aim is to prevent workers from conducting a fight.

When MJN Colston announced its intention to slow down implementation of BESNA terms, for example, Unite declared this a great victory. In fact, MJN Colston had made clear to their representative trade body that this was a question of timing, not implementation.

Workers should study carefully Unite's strike ballot when the details are released. Rather than a coordinated attempt to bring together all of the threatened workers, it has the character of a stunt to encourage the employers to include Unite in their negotiations. McAulay, announcing the ballot, even said, "Unite is not opposed to change, but change needs to be negotiated not imposed".

McAulay accused Balfour Beatty of being "the main aggressor" in the BESNA negotiations, but his concern is that "their greed will bring mayhem to an industry desperately trying to steer a path through the recession".

He admitted that the union was driven to this limited ballot because of pressure from members, who "have made it clear how angry they are over this attack". The union's ballot, however, only aims to return workers to the already stalled JIB negotiations. Under conditions of economic downturn, the employers will still be looking to find ways of implementing cuts in wages and conditions even within the JIB.

Defending workers from attacks on their existing wages and conditions cannot be achieved within the terms of the existing negotiations. In its formation the JIB was intended to regulate labour relations to ensure the operation and survival of the industry. But the present situation has arisen because of the breakdown of the conditions that gave rise to the JIB.

Neither can wages and conditions be defended by any of the parties or organisations dedicated to defending capitalism. At a recent Unite meeting both McAulay and Assistant General Secretary Gail Cartmail

suggested some future Labour government might move to defend workers' rights. This is not self-delusion, but wilful deception.

Workers confront the urgent task of building new organisations of their own, in implacable struggle against the union bureaucracy, to take forward their struggle against the employers. This requires the extension of the rank-and-file organisations to all workplaces, elected and controlled directly by workers.

Rather than being a mechanism for embarrassing Unite into limited action, electricians and plumbers must unite with other trades and grades on site in these rank-and-file committees in order to take forward combined strike action.

Construction workers are in a fight not just against one, or seven or eight, companies, but against the entire profit system and those parties and organisations that defend it. Construction workers must develop rank-and-file committees as conscious political organisations, and unite with other sections of the working class in a common fight against the employers and the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat government.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)