Striking electricians oppose Unite union's efforts to isolate dispute

Steve James
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Thousands of building workers held protests December 7 against attempts by major building companies to impose a 35 percent pay cut.

Protests were held in London, at Blackfriars Station, at Llandough Hospital in Cardiff, Kelvin Hall School in Cardiff, Hareema, at the Conoco site in Immingham and the SSI steel works at Redcar. Sites at St Catherine's hospital at Birkenhead, Manchester Town Hall, and the Walkergate Medical Centre in Newcastle also saw demonstrations.

In Glasgow, workers took unofficial strike action and 100 or so workers demonstrated outside the corporate headquarters of Balfour Beatty Engineering Services (BBES) in the Hillington industrial estate. The BBES workers stopped passing traffic to explain their case. A site office at the new Cambuslang fire station site was briefly occupied.

BBES has been central to the attack on building workers and is instrumental in promoting the Building Engineering Services National Agreement, (BESNA), a break-away from the decades-old Joint Industry Board (JIB) national agreement. JIB sets pay rates across the industry.

The move from JIB to BESNA rates is being enforced by seven companies, with BBES only the most prominent of them, who are demanding workers sign a new contract or face being sacked. December 7 was the date on which the new contracts begin to come into force.

The dispute, in which workers have repeatedly taken unofficial strike action, demonstrated and occupied building sites, has confronted sustained sabotage from the union Unite.

• Despite BESNA being introduced by seven leading building companies, Unite insisted that only BBES workers be balloted for strike action.

• Confronted with an 82 percent strike vote at BBES, Unite claimed that a re-ballot was necessary in the face of the "threat" of a court injunction under the terms of the anti-union laws. BBES management did not even have to trouble itself to request an injunction.

• Unite refused to officially back the December 7 protests.

• A new ballot will now be held between December 20 and January 6 – over the Christmas period, when workers are most vulnerable to financial pressure.

The World Socialist Web Site asked workers at the BBES HQ their view on the strike and on Unite's role. They were critical of the union, particularly over the decision to ballot only Balfour Beatty workers. They spoke of their experiences in the industry and called for a far greater struggle to be taken up. Workers also supported rank and file initiatives, though these were not conceived of as being politically independent of the unions.

Jim said, "The union leaders are backing away from strike action. They should have let the courts make the decision. What happened was their heads went down, when in fact they should have left it to the courts, another part of the establishment. Then there was talk of involving ACAS, the conciliation service. Why would you involve ACAS when 82 percent of the workers have voted to go on strike? This is absolute nonsense. It's not going to get us anywhere. It is a sign of weakness and a sign of the compromise the unions are willing to make."

Derek said, "The way forward for this dispute is to let everyone know, to come together and fight it as one. You can't fight it as just one person, or a group of 50 or 200. There are 60 million people in Britain, We need

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everyone together, or we will just be trampled over. We are not getting the publicity we need.

"I don't think its fair there was only a ballot at Balfour Beatty. Those at other companies should have the chance of doing the same."

Andy said, "We should be shutting down places, shutting down roads. This isn't doing anything. Everyone standing about, we need a bit of action, like they are doing down in London. You need protests, you need to stop construction. I think a rank-and-file movement is a good idea. I am an offshore worker and am here to stand up for the boys and what they believe in."

Lindsay said, "I am an electrician. This is the thin end of a very thick wedge. This year they are bringing in BESNA, but next year it will be something else. The intention down the line is to get rid of electricians. You will not have proper electricians. You will have someone doing the installation, someone doing the inspection and testing, someone does wiring and so on. They are trying to get to a situation where there is no continuous employment."

Bill, also an electrician, said, "The only way forward is to rip up the BESNA and go back to the JIB agreement. It has been in place for over 40 years and there has never been a problem with it. The companies aren't making losses.

"We are stood [picketing] outside of Balfour Beatty's office now. They made £55 million in profit last year. There is no way they can claim they need to cut my wages to keep them going. The CEO is on at £1 million a year.

"They are cutting it up to make more profit. Times are hard, work is low. The country is having problems with the recession, so they are using this to their advantage. They know we are in a weak position. They are doing it around Christmas, when people are worrying about their jobs, because you can't get a job around Christmas.

"There was a shop stewards meeting [about the decision to only ballot Balfour Beatty], when that was decided. My steward wanted everybody balloted.

"What the companies do—if a ballot comes up—they start moving people from site to site, and all of a sudden that vote becomes invalid. I'd like to see Unite do more, I'd like to see them ballot all seven companies and I know everybody would be out as well."

Tam said, "Straight away BESNA needs to be stopped. There have been BESNA-like conditions in our industry for quite a while now, and it is coming to light now, in economic times when they really are going for the throat. They have sniffed blood for a few years and now they know they can really have a go at us. So first we need to beat BESNA and after that we can look to getting our trade back, better terms and conditions. Not just builders, everybody's life conditions are under threat and they won't rest until we are slaves again.

"I thought they should have balloted everybody, but Balfour's are the ring leaders. They are trying to take the biggest one out first. But it is a dangerous thing to just go for Balfour when there are other serious players here too. It is wrong to only target one company.

"Without the rank-and-file in London, this wouldn't have been happening. Without them 10 years ago it wouldn't have happened on the Jubilee Line either [strikes by electricians over wage rates on the London Underground extension]. There wouldn't be an electrician now if it had not been for these guys. There are guys still blacklisted because of that. They saved our trade, but they can't get work now. So a lot should be said for those guys."

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