

Unite's sabotaging of UK electricians dispute aided by ex-left

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Electricians opposing the imposition of new contracts that would cut wages by up to a third face the sabotage of their struggle by the union Unite.

The proposed new Building Engineering Services National Agreement (BESNA) was advanced last year by eight of the 14 major construction contractors. They were frustrated at delays in getting their dictates through the Joint Industry Board (JIB), which has set national terms and pay levels for 40 years.

The BESNA proposals would regrade electricians' pay from an hourly rate of £16.25 to between £14 and £10.50. All grading would be done by employers, who would be able to treat the majority of construction workers as semi-skilled.

The new contracts currently affect around 6,000 workers, but the agreement heralds attacks on all sections of the industry. Casualisation is already rife, and the majority of the 6,000 threatened electricians are subcontracted workers.

This is the result of years of complicity with employers by construction unions. Two trade bodies represent the large electrical contractors. The BESNA has been proposed by the Heating and Ventilating Contractors Association (HVCA), while members of the Electrical Contractors Association (ECA) continue to back the JIB. Although they are also seeking changes to pay and conditions, the union presents them and the JIB as allies.

Recent documents exposing the level of blacklisting within construction also reveal the extent of the unions' collusion. Recent employment tribunals have confirmed that UCATT builders' union official Mick Dooley and Unite member Dave Smith were both blacklisted on the basis of a secret report listing their union activity. However, the tribunals also concluded that the workers had no legal recourse as they were

employed through agencies rather than directly.

Because of this rotten record, it has been estimated that around 80 percent of the affected electricians in London are not union members.

When the dispute began, electricians attempted to bring together all those affected in rank-and-file organisations. Unite's reaction was unbridled hostility, with National Officer for Construction Bernard McAulay describing "this small fringe group" as "cancerous opportunists".

The union subsequently realised that by paying lip service to the rank-and-file organisations, relying on the ex-left groups in its leadership to cover their double-dealing, they could appear to support the strike without committing themselves to anything. Assistant General Secretary Gail Cartmail explained in September that Unite would support the unofficial movement up to it taking strike action, which it would have to repudiate.

In December, Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey told protesters the union welcomed the rank-and-file committees, just months after his betrayal of British Airways workers. Kevin Coyne, Unite's National Energy Officer, told a London rank-and-file meeting last week that the union is "encouraging" such committees, and that the union would support official strikes with "full resources". This prompted an angry shout of "Two f***ing months too late!"

For weeks in the autumn, Unite made vague pledges to ballot for strike action, but when it came the ballot only applied to roughly half the 1,690 electricians employed at just one company, Balfour Beatty (BBES). The vote for strike action was nearly 82 percent. Unite immediately called for arbitration. The strike was then called off when BBES issued a legal challenge.

Unite announced they would be balloting again over Christmas, but this ballot was delayed and will not be

completed until February 2. The first official strike is now due on February 9.

In the meantime, new contracts have been sent to workers. Initially the union told workers to return the new contracts unsigned, but then encouraged them to sign and send them back with a letter of protest that they had signed under duress. A third letter has now advised workers to sign the contract and send the letter of protest under separate cover.

Union officials like Coyne have described the letter as “a disappointment”, but claim it is a tactical manoeuvre. Workers should sign under duress and then take their claims to tribunal, he told a London meeting last week. A local official said it was better for workers to be in employment and fighting than to be sacked.

A pseudo rank-and-file committee, dominated by lower ranking union bureaucrats, is in fact being used as the primary means of preventing a rank-and-file rebellion against the union. The Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) have played a key role in turning the dispute away from being a defence of wages and conditions against the union’s betrayals and into a campaign to recruit workers into the union and ensure its continued domination of the dispute.

As a result, from 500 workers at its launch in August, the London meetings are now attracting barely one-tenth of that number.

At the London meeting, there was intense anger when one local official denounced electricians at one company for not joining the union. When it was suggested that JIB representatives be invited to rank-and-file meetings, another electrician pointed out that the JIB takes a lot of money from them.

The SWP’s industrial organiser, Michael Bradley, was an invited speaker. His remarks focused exclusively on the need for the union to offer a lead “if people are wobbling”. If the unions “give a clear lead”, he said, this will meet a positive response from workers. Discussing the need for “a long-term strategy” he made clear what he meant: “to get people into the union”.

Unions had recruited in significant numbers after the November 30 public sector pensions strike, he said, indicating that their own action would also bring workers into Unite. He made no mention of the betrayal of the pensions dispute by the same unions within just a few weeks of the strike.

Describing the January 14 national meeting of electricians held in Birmingham, the Socialist Party reports Gail Cartmail, Unite assistant general secretary, making clear that only 830 employees of Balfour Beatty are to be balloted.

They then write that the electricians “will however welcome Gail’s commitment that Unite regional offices and full-time officials must ‘consistently’ support the protests”.

The Socialist Party reports “a host of questions, some rightly very critical, put to Gail” as well as “[c]riticism of Unite full-time officers in the regions, and especially of national construction official Bernard McAulay” that “drew a very angry response from Gail.”

Naturally, no such anger towards Gail or Unite is expressed by the Socialist Party, which simply goes on to list without comment the various initiatives being proposed.

Employers will push to impose BESNA agreements over the next few months. To oppose this, workers need class struggle organisations of their own that fight for a socialist alternative, set up in direct opposition to the pro-company trade unions.



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