

Letter on the plight of construction workers in Britain

11 February 2012

I am writing in regards to the conditions of workers in the building industry in Britain.

Even before the new contractors employers' body BESNA [see "Unite's sabotaging of UK electricians dispute aided by ex-left"] had set out 35 percent wage cuts and job deskilling, the existing building workers contract negotiated by the union provided little defence of workers' jobs and wages.

I work at a small company confronted by the global economic crisis, which is hitting construction hard. The company's main source of work is refurbishment and maintenance of public buildings, schools, hospitals, etc., that are taking a hammering as public funds are diverted to prop up the banks.

One example of the severity of the cuts was while I was working at a school. I asked the caretaker if it was expecting large budget cuts. He said the maintenance budget was cut from £28,000 to £6,000 last year. Multiply that across the country and the impact is enormous.

A large section of building work is tied up with public spending, more so since the collapse of the housing market.

We recently had a dispute over a four-year pay freeze, and discrepancies in wage rates between workers. The employers imposed a settlement whereby wages were brought into line by cutting the higher earners, and bringing in varied increases for the others.

During the dispute, two workers joined the union, Unite. The argument for joining was that the union would provide legal representation. The result was that the two who had joined found themselves on different sides of the settlement—one with a pay cut and the other with a rise.

Those of us angered by the wage cut formally made our disagreement known citing an illegal break of contract. Management dismissed this though, and

refused to reinstate our wages. They threatened us with making redundancies if we didn't accept it.

I am near retirement and life gets hard in the building industry as you get older. I said I would be willing to go, but the offer made amounted to less than £9,000 (approx. \$14,000), as opposed to £25,000 per annum in wages.

Clearly, they only want cheap redundancies, involving those workers with less time in employment.

The employers moved on from redundancies to cite their ability to lay the whole workforce off. Under a building workers' contract, if a company has no work, after one week a worker can be laid off for three months without pay; then after a further week of paid idleness, another three month layoff, and so on.

When another worker, angry about his wage cut, contacted the new union member asking how to fight the arbitrary cutting of wages, it was suggested he ask the employer for a new contract. If this set out the wage cut, and the employer would not move, he was advised to take his case to a tribunal citing constructive dismissal.

According to reports I have read, the number of industrial tribunals has trebled in five years and the employers have paid off workers in three out of five cases. Prime Minister David Cameron intends to make it harder for workers to go to industrial tribunals, something the employers are campaigning on.

In this instance, my workmate could only expect to win a financial award to the maximum of his redundancy payoff, which is less than half his annual wage. When he asked about supporting strike action with the union, they replied that striking only made matters worse!

The result of the union's advice would be that my workmate would end up out of a job, recorded as a "troublemaker" and placed on the construction industry

employers' blacklist that is widely enforced. I noticed one blacklisted construction worker said that at his tribunal a Unite official had appeared on behalf of the company.

Buoyed by the unions' previous betrayals, the employers want even more. The only objections from the unions, in this case Unite, are that such attacks stir the workers against the employers. Without the unions, they warn, employers will lose control.

I agree with WSWS.org that what are needed are rank-and-file organisations—independent of the trade union and labour bureaucracy—to unite all sections of the working class in a general strike to bring down the Cameron government.

All the best in the monumental work in progress.

JS



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