

British “left” covers for Unite union’s betrayal of electricians’ dispute

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The claim by British pseudo-left groups that the Unite trade union’s decision to call off action by UK electricians and other construction workers represents a victory is a betrayal of the working class.

The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP) are once again acting as cheerleaders and liars for the trade union bureaucracy. The SP declared a “priceless victory” and “hugely significant moment for these workers, but also the rest of the union movement.”

According to the SWP, the victory is “historic... workers had beaten the building bosses who wanted to tear up their terms and conditions and slash their pay.”

On February 16, the UK’s largest construction firm Balfour Beatty (BBES) lost a High Court ruling on its bid for an injunction against a strike ballot by Unite. Following the ruling, BBES withdrew its plan, along with other building firms, to implement the Building Engineering Services National Agreement (BESNA).

Last year, 7 of 14 construction companies broke away from the 40-year-old Joint Industry Board (JIB) national collective agreement to establish BESNA. The companies were seeking to impose pay cuts of up to 35 percent and other inferior terms and conditions for workers in the industry.

Armed with a legally secured mandate to organise a strike against this plan, Unite rushed to end the dispute. It immediately entered into talks with BBES and by 11 am the following day, Unite and BBES issued a joint statement reading: “The current dispute between Unite and the seven companies who are promoting the BESNA agreement is causing serious concern within the industry and *threatens to escalate into a damaging conflict.*” [Emphasis added]

Unite stated its sympathy for the employers’ aims, declaring that it “understands the questions raised by

those seven companies and believes a review of the JIB and other industry working rule agreements is desirable.”

It continued, “BBES has agreed to withdraw the BESNA contracts and Unite has agreed not to pursue further industrial action or protest on the basis that *wide-ranging talks will now take place on modernising the industry.*” [Emphasis added]

Modernising working agreements, as millions of workers have learned, is the union bureaucracy’s favoured euphemism for agreeing to the destruction of working conditions. That is why Unite’s pledge was the signal for the other companies involved to follow BBES’s lead. Within five days, NG Bailey had withdrawn from BESNA, followed swiftly by the remaining five.

Unite has used the High Court ruling to cement its relations with big business. General Secretary Len McCluskey called NG Bailey’s move “a further recognition that only consultation and negotiation can secure the stability of the industry and people’s livelihoods.” He added, “The construction industry is central to our national economic recovery, which is why Unite regards stable industrial relations across the sector as critical.”

Heating and Ventilating Contractors Association (HVCA) Chief Executive Blane Judd made clear how they intend to utilise Unite’s deal. Over the next few months, he said, “the HVCA will be continuing to work towards the modernisation of the sector’s terms and conditions of employment in such a way as to incorporate a number of the principles contained in the BESNA.”

BESNA was a catalyst “for change, and we have to capitalise on that and use it as an opportunity to embrace the future,” he added.

Unite's determination to maintain its relations with the construction firms was matched only by its hostility to any action by workers. Not one official strike was organised by Unite in seven months. Instead, when the BESNA firms issued new work contracts, Unite merely instructed workers to return them unsigned or send them back with a letter of protest that they had signed under duress. By early February, the BESNA group could announce that 88 percent of workers had signed the new contracts.

Only in the autumn, as a result of growing anger among construction workers, did Unite hold a strike ballot. Even then, the ballot applied only to roughly half the 1,690 electricians employed at just one company, Balfour Beatty. Unite called for arbitration before calling action off altogether when the mandate was legally challenged. Now, following a second ballot, backed up by a High Court ruling in its favour, Unite has called off everything.

From the outset, protests and strikes took place in defiance of Unite. A large majority of building workers are outside the union due to its rotten record of collusion with the employers.

Last August, hundreds of workers established a rank-and-file organisation in London. But the leadership of the committee had as its agenda using the dispute as a recruitment campaign for the trade unions.

Jerry Hicks, a former member of the SWP and the National Executive Committee of Amicus (a predecessor of Unite), played a leading role from the outset. Around him orbited the ex-left groups.

It was thanks to them that a movement denounced by Unite National Officer Bernard McAulay as "cancerous" ended up working under his direction! Meetings of the committee were addressed on every occasion by Unite's top officials. In December, Unite General Secretary Gail Cartmail told a "rank-and-file" meeting that the union had organised a £25 million fighting fund devoted to the campaign. Three full-time officials were then assigned to it—headed by McAulay.

These millions will not be used to benefit the workforce, but to give the ex-left in the union access to the gravy train. The newly established Industry Development Forum, or Industry Modernisation Forum, between Unite and the employers will have a presence drawn from the leadership of the rank-and-file committee, who will be tasked with selling any

agreement.

In their article on the ending of the dispute on February 24, the Socialist Party enthused, "The campaign of the rank and file has pushed Unite into playing a far more leading role... It has shown that the union officialdom isn't a homogeneous block of conservatism that can't be moved into a positive role."

The message is that workers should embrace the bureaucracy and the hollowed-out organisations they represent. No wonder. The SP and the SWP are themselves prominent within the bureaucracy, occupying many of the leading positions within the unions at a local, regional and national level.

Amid its eulogising the success of the workers in supposedly pressuring Unite to fight, the SWP insists, "There should be no return to the corrupt 'company unionism' that has infected construction."

This is a revealing admission that points to the fraud they are now perpetrating. The company unionism being admitted to has been practised by Unite. Now the SWP expects workers to swallow the claim that such practices have been abandoned because Unite has called off all strikes and entered into discussions with the top representatives of the construction industry!

For construction workers, the battle still remains to be fought. It can be successful only if the death grip of the Unite apparatus is broken. What are required are genuine rank-and-file organisations of class struggle and a new, socialist political perspective, not ginger groups working under the direction of the union bigwigs.



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