

UK dockers strike suspended by Unite union

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On March 21, a planned two-week strike by 75 dockers at the Grangemouth container port in Scotland was suspended by the Unite trade union after only six days.

Talks on new shift patterns are being held this week at the government's Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS). The dispute was shut down as its impact was spreading, following the refusal of oil tanker drivers at the adjacent Grangemouth oil refinery to cross picket lines.

Workers struck against demands by Forth Ports for seven-day working. Currently weekend cover is mostly provided by workers on overtime. The shift changes would have cut some workers' wages by as much as £1,800 annually, while forcing the entire workforce to work one weekend in two. The company said that the union had agreed to the new shift patterns in 2011. The current episode is the third attempt by the company to impose the new shift schedule.

The Forth Ports site at Grangemouth, east Stirlingshire, is typical of modern container operations. A tiny number of workers operate huge mobile carriers and gantries around the clock, moving 150,000 containers with 9 million tonnes of goods annually. The port handles 30 percent of Scottish GDP, with daily sailings to Rotterdam, Antwerp, Felixstowe and Hamburg.

Forth Ports was formerly the Forth Harbour Authority, which was privatized in 1992 following the abolition of the National Dock Labour Scheme by the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher. The company controls a number of ports in the UK—on the Firth of Forth, the Firth of Tay and the Thames estuary, including the huge Tilbury container base, the main container hub for the London conurbation.

Forth Ports is controlled by Arcus Infrastructure Partners, a London-based fund manager specialising in infrastructure. These include Euroports' worldwide

terminal and logistic operations, train manufacturer Alpha Trains, UK rolling stock operator Angel Trains Group, and European communication towers operators Shere Group and TDF.

The strike began March 15, following a vote by 73 of the 75 workers affected directly by the new shift patterns. Twenty engineers and administrative staff at the port were not balloted, but attended rallies and supported their colleagues' demands. Workers maintained pickets at the dock gates.

One worker attending a rally told the *Daily Record*, "We aren't going on strike for extra money, we're simply trying to keep our family life going. We want to see our kids at weekends. There are also changes to our pension plans, which we have faithfully paid into for many years to now be told we won't be getting what we were promised at the start. There is so much anger that people are determined to press ahead with the strike."

During the strike, matters came to a head when Forth Ports' management attempted to open another route into the container terminal through the adjacent Grangemouth fuel refinery. When workers moved their picket to the refinery, oil tanker drivers hauling fuel to hundreds of petrol stations refused to cross the picket lines. Facing an escalation that could spiral out of the control of the trade unions, Forth Ports quickly sought further talks with Unite.

No agreement between the parties has been announced so far, but whether in days or weeks Forth Ports and Unite will re-organise their joint offensive. From the start, Unite made clear, in line with the transformation of the trade unions into allies of corporate management, that it sought nothing more than good relations with Forth Ports in carrying forward their shared interests with the company. The union's Scottish secretary, Pat Rafferty, told the press, "The dispute is trying to get the company back to the

negotiating table, in order to come to a negotiated settlement on this.”

No doubt, there will have been communication between the Scottish government, Forth Ports and Unite to temporarily cool things down. A general election is due in Scotland May 5, and the last thing the Scottish National Party (SNP) government, or Unite, want in the next few weeks is a major confrontation with the working class.

Unite has played a central role in defending management at Grangemouth. In 2008, INEOS, which operates the Grangemouth refinery, attacked the oil refinery workers’ pension scheme. A short strike, the first in decades, exposed the vulnerability of Britain’s petrol, oil and diesel supplies to actions by small groups of workers. Five years later, in 2013, INEOS were better prepared. The company locked out the workforce and threatened to close most of their operation. Unite, with the support of the Scottish and British governments, capitulated in 24 hours.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time, “Had Unite been anything other than a front organisation for corporate management, Grangemouth could have become the focal point of a movement in the working class against austerity and the ransacking of workers’ living standards. It would undoubtedly have won an extraordinarily powerful response across all sections of the working class.”

The same questions are posed three years later under even sharper conditions. The Grangemouth dispute has emerged simultaneously with a number of confrontations across Britain, expressing a growing sense of discontent in the working class.

Of these, the determined and principled stance taken by junior hospital doctors in England against the destruction of the National Health Service (NHS) is the largest. Smaller groups of workers have recently struck against Glasgow City Council’s drastic cuts policies, while two strike ballots of council workers in Scotland are in preparation.

Other groups in dispute include secondary school teachers in West Dunbartonshire, members of the Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS), who are planning a third set of short strikes later this month over staffing levels and the role of principal teachers. These are the first teachers’ strikes in the area since the 1980s. Last week, college lecturers across Scotland

struck in the first of 32 planned days of action between now and the summer, involving one-, two- and three-day strikes. The dispute concerns sharp pay differentials between EIS members doing the same job in different colleges, who get sharply differing rates of pay.

Taken together these struggles could begin a significant offensive throughout the UK against pay cuts, unsocial hours, mass local authority job losses, the assault on education, the destruction of social welfare, pensions and the NHS and the attack on democratic rights. But this is impossible within the framework of trade unions that systematically fragment, isolate and break up every single dispute.

The author also recommends:

Unite union hands victory to INEOS in Scotland’s Grangemouth refinery lockout
[28 October 2013]



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